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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

NEW COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

SEVEN TO DIE

by BRETT HALLIDAY

There were two down and five to go — with a multi-million dollar jackpot awaiting the last survivor. Both deaths could have been natural but their close incidence caused the remaining five to summon Mike Shayne for added insurance. After that, he was in up to his neck . . 2 to 39

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SEVEN TO DIE

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Once there were seven old men — and the last one who survived stood to inherit $3,000,000. Then, all of a sudden, there were six, then five — and the terrified heirs called on Mike Shayne to find out their killer.

OLD MAN SEYMOUR was so very rich that he could afford the finest suite in the luxurious Miami Beach hotel. Because of the emphysema, which was slowly strangling him to death, he couldn't open the windows. He couldn't go down and swim in the ocean or the imperial-size pool that went with the hotel. He couldn't go far from the oxygen machine in the suite.

He could look out at one of the most enchanting views in the world. That was about all.

This afternoon Seymour wasn't even looking out. He was taking a nap on the king-size bed. His male nurse was down at the pool.

Seymour's visitor let himself in with a pass key. He moved quietly

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so as not to awaken his host. He took the carefully folded blanket off the foot of the bed, double-folded it again — and placed it firmly over Mr. Seymour's face.

The old man struggled very feebly. There wasn't much fight left in his body and he probably didn't realize what was being done to him. Emphysema killed him as much as the blanket.

It was all over very fast.

The visitor put the blanket back where he found it and was careful to wipe the doorknob as he left.

There was no sign of violence, so that the hotel doctor certified to death from natural causes . . .

Phil had been a friend of Seymour. He wasn't rich and he didn't have emphysema. For a man his age he was in pretty good health.

He left his regular bar about ten in the evening, as was his regular custom, and began the two-block walk back to his third floor Detroit apartment.

The hit-run car was waiting down the block from the corner where Phil had to cross. It picked up speed and was doing sixty when it struck him. The car manufacturer would have been pleased with its quick acceleration.

Phil — or what had been Phil a moment before — was dragged two hundred feet before his body fell away from the speeding sedan. The driver was an obvious expert at this sort of thing.

The police found the death vehicle the next day. It had been stolen and the legal owner was playing poker with friends the evening before.

Nobody could prove a thing — in fact, nobody really tried. Old Phil was a widower and lived alone. There were distant cousins in Boston, but they didn't really care very much when they got the news. Phil's estate was very small, but not too small for them to quarrel over.

In due time they quarreled over it.

Because Phil and Seymour had both made provision that it should, the news reached Harry and Sam and George and Will and Julius.

It was unwelcome news — or was it welcome? They couldn't be quite sure which.

It began to frighten them after they thought it over. The two deaths frightened them both collectively and individually.

Sam was the most alarmed. He telephoned the others and said things they had been afraid to say for themselves.

"I think any one of us could be next," was the gist of each of the phone calls. The others didn't want to agree, but they had to.

It was Julius who suggested the meeting. He owned a fine old house in a luxury section of Miami Beach (about two miles from where Seymour had died) and invited his friends to visit him. After due and deliberate thought,

the other four accepted unanimously.

The gathering was not much of a success. All five were frightened and they stiff-legged around the old house like rival tomcats staking out new territory.

They talked, but the talk didn't seem to get anywhere. It is difficult to speak freely or frankly when one of your listeners may be planning to murder you. There is a natural fear of giving that killer an advantage.

By the end of the first day, each of the five men had found that out for himself.

After three days they were desperate.

After four the meeting was at a hopeless deadlock.

It was on the fifth day that Julius, who alone of the five was familiar with Miami and Miami Beach, suggested calling in the famous private detective Mike Shayne.

II

"IT WAS JUST ABOUT as crazy a scene as I've ever gotten into," Mike Shayne said to his beautiful secretary Lucy Hamilton after his first meeting with the five frightened old men.

"There they sat, in a circle, in the library of the Miami Beach mansion, each trying to look at me and watch the others at the same time. It was like being in a circle of human monsters out of an old Gothic novel."

"I suppose it was, Michael," Lucy Hamilton said. "What was it all about?"

"They're afraid of each other, Angel," Shayne told her. "That's exactly what it's about. Those five old gnomes are so scared of each other that they actually sweat fear. I could smell it in that room. It almost made me afraid myself, and I don't scare easily."

"What's it all about?"

"It's about three million dollars," Mike Shayne said. "A little over three million to be exact. One of them is going to inherit it — one of them and only one. Naturally, each of the five wants to get the three million. On top of that each one thinks one of the others is willing to kill to see that he doesn't get it."

"I see," Lucy Hamilton said. "Or maybe I don't see. How does killing come into the picture?"

"They're the final survivors of a 'Last Man' club," her big, redheaded boss explained. He got a bottle of his favorite Martell brandy out of the back room of the office and poured a stiff shot into a plain glass tumbler.

Then he drank a good half of the brandy and leaned back in his desk chair. He considered putting his feet on the desk, but since that meant rearranging a sheaf of papers he had just spread out there, he rejected the idea.

"Back in 1917, they were all members of a crack National

Guard cavalry squadron getting ready to ship over to France and pin the Kaiser's ears back," Shayne said.

"Most of them were sons of well-to-do families," he added. "Till war was declared, the outfit had been more like an exclusive social club than anything else."

"Like New York's Squadron A," Lucy Hamilton said.

"Exactly. Anyway, as the one they call Julius explained it, the orders to ship out made them realize that some of them probably wouldn't be shipping back.

"They threw a big bash in the armory the night before they left. That's when they got the idea for the Last Man Club. Everybody put in money. The fund was and is handled by a major metropolitan bank. The last survivor was to get it all.

"Most of the men were from rich families, as I said. The original kitty came to just under fifty thousand dollars. Good investment management by the bank and inflation have increased it to over three million now.

"The five men I talked to are the last of the lot. One of them — the last to stay alive — will get the whole three million when the others are dead."

He paused and drank more of his brandy.

"I can see that, Michael," Lucy Hamilton said, "but why are they so scared? They are all very old men by now, with only a short while to live. I don't see why the money is so important. If they were young men . . . but they aren't."

"Maybe they still think they are," Mike Shayne said. "Maybe greed just doesn't know when it's time to quit. I don't really know. All I do know is that there they sat in a room so full of fear you could smell it.

"They are positive one of them is a killer — maybe more than one. They're also willing to pay me twenty thousand dollars, plus expenses, to find out for sure if they're right. That's an offer I can't refuse, even the way business has been lately."

Lucy Hamilton was watching him intently. "Are they right?" she asked him. "Michael, do you realy think one of those old men is a murderer?"

"I said, I don't really know," Mike Shayne told her. "It is possible. Within the last three months, two other members of the club have died — the last two except for the five I just talked with. That seems to be what touched off the panic."

"Were they murdered?" Lucy Hamilton asked.

"If they were, it was a smooth, professional job by somebody who knew his business," Shayne said. He told her how Phil and Seymour had died.

"It could have been perfectly natural in both cases. The one man was dying of emphysema anyway

— and late-night hit-and-runs are no novelty in Detroit. On the other hand, a good hit man — or even an amateur — might have arranged either or both of those deaths. No way really to tell now."

"What are you going to do?"

"First, I'm going to look for a motive," Shayne said. "I mean, a strong personal motive affecting one of those men as an individual. Then I'll look for opportunity. They couldn't all have been here on the Beach and in Detroit at the right times.

"At least, I'll stir up the water and see what comes to the top. There's no such thing as a perfect murder once murder is even suspected. Suspicion means the killer has made at least one mistake. I'll find that mistake.

III

MIKE SHAYNE DECIDED his first move would be to go up to the Miami News Building on the bay and see his old friend, ace feature writer Tim Rourke. The files of a metropolitan newspaper hold an immense amount of information on a range of subjects that would stagger the imagination of any ordinary citizen.

Shayne wanted to see what might be there on the background of the five frightened men — and Rourke was just the man to find it for him.

It didn't prove quite that easy.

Mike Shayne had no trouble finding his car in its usual place in the downtown parking lot. He hadn't counted on someone else finding it first.

The three men waiting for him at the car were very smooth and grim and very, very professional.

Although they did not touch their weapons, all three wore guns under the jackets of their expensive, dark-silk suits — and moved with the easy grace of the human panther.

They had Mike Shayne boxed in before he realized what they were about — one on each side and one at his back. Nobody touched the big man or reached for a gun. They didn't have to.

The redhead realized that, if they had orders to kill him, he would very probably be dead by now. He made no move for his own gun. Just set his big muscles for instant action and waited.

The man on his right side said, "That's using your head, Mister Shayne. Keep on using it and nobody has to get hurt."

"It's your dime," Shayne said. "Are you going to tell me what the hell this is all about?"

"Our boss wants to talk to you," the man said, keeping his voice low but making sure he was heard above the noise of downtown city traffic.

"How do I know that's all?"

"Because, if he'd wanted you hit, you'd be meat on concrete by now," the man said. "Just take it easy. We're all going to walk a

couple of blocks and ride an elevator up to a lawyer's office. When the boss finishes talking to you, you can go."

Mike Shayne was interested enough to go along with the three hoods. As they said, if this had been a hit, he'd have been gunned down by now. He wanted to see who the "Boss" was and what the man wanted.

The office they took him to was on an upper floor of the Dupont Building in downtown Miami. Mike Shayne recognized the name of the law firm on the office door. It was one of the big ones in the field of local criminal law. As he remembered, this firm had many upper underworld characters among its clients.

Once inside the expensively furnished lobby, they went straight to the private office of one of the senior partners.

It amused the big detective that the pretty blonde receptionist obviously recognized him. She didn't say anything, but he could see the curiosity in her whole expression.

There were two men waiting inside the law office. One was the firm partner whose name was on the door. The other, the big redhead didn't remember ever having seen before.

This one was short and swarthy with traces of beard stubble darkening the powder on his recently shaved chin. He had black beady eyes like those of some small feral animal. Like a weasel or a ferret, Shayne thought.

The man wore overly high heels, an expensive looking fitted toupee and a silk suit that must have set him back at least three hundred dollars. The studs in the French cuffs of his shirt featured diamonds and emeralds.

Shayne knew the type and wasn't particularly impressed. This had to be the Boss of course.

"This is Mike Shayne?" the little man asked in a tone he might have used on finding a dead lizard in one of his pockets.

Shayne said nothing. He waited, but took the opportunity to set his feet and tense every muscle for instant action.

The Boss looked at Shayne, and Shayne looked at the Boss.

"You hear me, Shayne," the unpleasant little man said, "and you hear me good. I know you're working for a bunch of half-dead old slobs on the Beach. They're all going to die pretty soon anyway, even if nobody pushes them. You get off the case. Let nature finish them off."

The little man paused for a minute, then indulged himself in what he evidently considered a laugh. "It ain't nice to fool with Mother Nature, Shayne. You leave them old slobs alone. You hear?"

"What's it to you?" Mike Shayne asked.

"What's it to me ain't nothing to you, shamus," the little hood snapped back. I want you off this case, and that's what you should

think about. You hear me?"

"I hear you," Mike Shayne said, "but that's all. You want me out so you can kill the lot of them?"

"Watch yourself, Shayne." It was the attorney who spoke. "You can't make accusations you can't prove against a client of mine."

"Let him say what he wants," the Boss said. "I don't care what he says. Just don't argue with me, shamus. I ain't planning to kill nobody, but if I was, the like of you wouldn't stop me. Maybe I better have my boys here give you a little lesson about that."

"Careful, Manny," the attorney said. "This man Shayne doesn't bluff."

"I ain't bluffing," Manny started to say.

He didn't get a chance to finish.

The two hoods on either side of the big redhead were watching their boss. That was a mistake on their part.

Shayne took a long step backward and swung his two long arms out and up. He got each of the men by the back of the neck and swung his hands together.

They were completely off guard.

The sound of the two heads when they made contact was like two ripe coconuts.

Just a little harder and their skulls would have been cracked — but Mike Shayne knew exactly what he was doing.

Both men were knocked out, but that was all.

When the redhead released their necks, they crumpled to the floor at his feet.

The third hood was by the windows. He whirled and went for the gun holstered under his left armpit.

The attorney jumped between Shayne and the gun, yelling, "For God's sake, *no!* You can't *do* that in here. *Stop* him, Manny."

Shayne had counted on that reaction. It gave him time to get his own gun out of its belt holster and point it at the Boss.

"No killing, Manny," the detective said. "That is, unless you want to be one of the corpses."

The Boss looked like a snake getting ready to strike — but he waved to his man to put the gun away.

Mike Shayne followed suit. "That's better," he said. "Don't send any of your thugs after me, Manny. Next time I might really get rough."

The two men on the floor began to groan.

"This is a standoff," Shayne said. "Anybody want to tell me what it's all about?"

"What it's about is you get off that case," the little Boss said. "I *mean* that. Now get *out!*"

When Mike Shayne saw that nobody was going to say anything else, he turned and left the office.

IV

MIKE SHAYNE TOOK his time walking down the corridor to the main door of the suite of offices. As he had more or less expected, the lawyer came out and hurried after him. Shayne stopped and waited.

"What kind of clients do you have these days?" he asked the attorney when the man caught up to him.

"I'm sorry," the man said and looked as if he meant it. "I had no idea there'd be that sort of nonsense going on. Manny said he heard you were involved in a case he has an interest in, and wanted to talk to you. I said he could use my office. If I'd known he was sending his goons for you . . . You know my office doesn't go in for that."

"It just did," the big man pointed out. "What is that bum's interest in my case?"

"I don't really know — and if I did it would be privileged information."

"I know," Shayne said. "Privileged right up to my funeral. Who is the little creep anyhow?"

"Privileged information," the lawyer repeated. "All I can say is, he's not local and he carries an awful lot of heat. If I were you, Shayne, I'd listen to what he has to say and get out of whatever you're mixed up in. He could put out a contract on you, you know."

"He probably will anyway for what I just did — and it wouldn't be for the first time. Besides, I'm no lawyer. I don't have that kind for clients, so I don't have to take orders from them." Mike Shayne sounded more casual than he felt. "So, if you won't tell me anything, I'd better be on my way."

The attorney shrugged. "Don't say you haven't been warned."

"I won't," Mike Shayne said, "and you tell little creepy I'm warning him, too. Tell him to stay off my tail. I'm no rabbit. I don't run — I bite."

With that, he went out of the suite of offices and on down the

hall to the elevators.

I probably should have kept my mouth shut, Shayne thought as he rode the elevator down to Flagler Street. *That Manny character is mean enough without me shooting off my big trap.*

That was true enough. A new and deadly card had been introduced into the game the big detective was playing. Manny and his hoods were a quite different factor from the five frightened old men in the old Miami Beach mansion. With the thugs around, the big man couldn't afford even one mistake.

He didn't yet understand why Manny was involved in the case, but by now he was a lot more ready to believe that the deaths of Seymour and Phil hadn't been accidents. A Manny could arrange that sort of thing with no trouble at all. A phone call could do it.

But why?

That was what Mike Shayne had to find out next.

He needed information, so he decided to follow his original plan and go get it from his friend, Miami News ace reporter Tim Rourke.

He found the writer in his small cluttered office on an upper floor of the News Building. Shayne greeted his old friend and accepted a shot of his favorite brandy and a paper cup of cold water from the cooler for a chaser.

He explained what he was looking for, and Rourke phoned the paper's morgue to have any files on the five old men sent up.

"The only one that comes to mind off hand," Rourke told his friend, "is old Julius Spicer over on the Beach. He's lived here most of his life."

"What sort is he?" Shayne asked.

"Just a standard type citizen," Rourke said. "Inherited some money and is supposed to have made a lot more by investments. On the other hand I don't think he's made much lately. More likely lost a bit. But he's still well off for all I know."

"Not the type to kill for money?"

"I wouldn't think so, Mike. Still, three million bucks is an awful lot of money. Plenty of otherwise reliable citizens might kill for that."

"You want me to take that seriously?"

"Not really," Rourke said and laughed. "Old Julius just isn't the type. Besides he's been pretty badly crippled by arthritis lately. His youngest brother's boy Sam lives with him and helps him get around the house. Some days the old man can't get out of a wheelchair. Young Sam is supposed to have come into a lot of money a couple of years back, but he still devotes himself to the old man."

It was at that moment that the messenger from the paper's morgue brought up the files.

They were thin enough to dis-

appoint Mike Shayne.

The News had nothing at all on two of the men — Harry Schmidt, and Sam L. Browning. Both were out of towners and evidently hadn't done anything notable enough to make the national Press.

There was an item naming George Tuttle as a big racetrack winner at a local track, but it was dated over thirty years back. George had evidently been both a playboy and a plunger at the time.

Will Meyer was also mentioned, but this was an even older item. He had lost his shirt in the 1929 stock market crash — and that included some Miami Beach real estate. There was no news of later date about the man.

There was a thin file on Julius Spicer, but in included nothing that Tim Rourke hadn't already covered.

"I can wire their home town papers about these other lads," Rourke told his friend. "I don't expect anything back until tomorrow at least, but if it's important, I'll give you a call."

"Thanks," Mike Shayne said. "There's one more man I need to know about." He went on to describe the little hood called Manny, and the trouble with him in the lawyer's office.

"That one's easy," Rourke said as he poured himself another stiff shot of brandy. "He has to be Manny 'The Boss' Ricco. His headquarters is Chicago, but he operates pretty well all over the eastern half of our fair land. Gambling and loan sharking are his specialties, and he's a real rough little rat. If he has a stake in who inherits the three million, Manny is plenty capable of ordering the rest of them hit."

"Capable, sure," Mike Shayne said. "Still if he was actually having the hits made, I don't think he'd have let me see his face. Besides none of those scared old men I saw looked the type to be mixed up with Manny."

"Somebody's mixed up with him," Rourke said and passed his friend the bottle. "Somebody *has* to be. Besides, two of your old duffers were gamblers in the past — George Tuttle at the track, and Will Meyer in Wall Street. A habit like that can be mighty hard to break. It can easily last through a lifetime."

"I'll look into them both," Shayne said, "but I don't think it's Manny himself having the men killed. Why should he? Those men are all so old their time is running out fast. They could all be dead in six months . . ."

"If I was Manny and I cared who got the three million bucks," Rourke said, "it's their very age that would scare me. I'd want to be sure *my* candidate won the jackpot. I'd be scared of him dropping dead any day and leaving another of the bunch to survive him."

"Come to think of it, so would

I." Mike Shayne nodded. "On the other hand, what I said about his not wanting me to tie him into the case still holds. I don't think Manny is calling the hits. He may know who it is, though. In fact, I'd make a real bet on that."

"I'll see if I can dig up any thing," Tim Rourke said. "I've got connections in Chicago. I can't really promise anything for sure, but I'll try. We can both call people we know around town here, too."

"So we can," Mike Shayne agreed. "Meanwhile, I guess I'd better get back over to the Beach and see what my five old boys have been up to."

Shayne reached for the brandy to pour a final drink into his glass.

That's when the phone on Tim Rourke's cluttered desk began to ring.

The reporter picked up the instrument, spoke briefly, then listened at length.

When he put the phone down, he turned to his friend. "You'd better get on over there for sure."

"Why?"

"Scratch one of your old men, Mike. That was our City Desk. The Beach police just pulled your Harry Schmidt out of the Bay. He fell in and was drowned an hour ago. No signs of foul play — but of course he could have been pushed instead of just falling in."

V

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE REACHED the house on the Biscayne Bay side of the island of Miami Beach he found his four remaining clients awaiting him in the big downstairs living room.

Julius Spicer was the first to speak. "I'm shocked, Mr. Shayne. I thought we hired you to protect us, and before the day is out my good friend Harry is dead."

"Hold on a minute," Mike Shayne said to the old man. I wasn't hired to bodyguard all of you. To do that would take several men, particularly if you wouldn't stay together all the time.

"My job was to find out if someone was trying to murder one or more of you and, if so, who it is. That's something a lot different from bodyguarding."

"I'm doing my own bodyguarding," Will Meyer told them. He took a small, nickle-plated revolver out of his jacket pocket and showed it to them. When he saw the expression on the big detective's face he added, "I know how to use this. I belong to a pistol shooting club back home."

"Then I hope you know enough not to use it carelessly," Shayne said. "Now, suppose you tell me what you know about Mr. Schmidt's death."

"He just went out for a walk," Julius Spicer replied. "He said being cooped up all the time was driving him up the wall. He said he thought we were scared over nothing. *Ha!* Now he knows whether we were too scared. *Now*

he knows — and may God rest his soul."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"He said just down to the end of the street to sit on the sea wall," Spicer explained. "He said watching the water would make him feel better. When he didn't come back in an hour I got nervous and sent Sam to look for him."

"Who's Sam?"

"My nephew. He lives with me here and helps take care of me when my arthritis is bad. He couldn't find Harry, but we figured maybe he'd just walked up to the drugstore a couple of blocks away to get cigars or something. Then a while later the police called. They'd found his body. He had this address in his wallet."

"His wallet wasn't taken then?"

"Nothing was taken, Mr. Shayne. That is, if you don't count his life as something."

"There's no proof his life was deliberately taken," Mike Shayne said. "He could have leaned over to look at something in the water, then slipped and fallen over."

He could see by their faces that none of them believed him.

In fact, he didn't really believe it himself. The redhead was becoming rapidly convinced that someone really *was* trying to kill these men, one by one.

At least, in this death, it could hardly have been Manny the Boss and his three hoods. Harry Schmidt must have been drowning just about the time Shayne was knocking their heads together in the attorney's office.

He considered telling the old men about that interview, decided against it for the moment.

"Has his family been notified?"

"We told the police whom to contact. Harry has — *had* — grandchildren in Philadelphia. They are the only relatives we know about."

"They'll be disappointed," Will Meyer said. "I suppose they hoped he'd outlive the rest of us so they could collect the jackpot."

"Wasn't he well off?" Shayne asked.

"*Harry!*" Meyer snorted. "Once he was comfortable, I suppose, but not lately. Harry was living in one of those — I think they call it a retirement home. I was surprised he managed to raise the plane fare to get down here."

Shayne thought to himself that, in such case, Schmidt would have been a likely suspect to want to see the rest of them dead. Had one of the others thought the same and decided to get the old man out of the way in self defense?

Or had Old Schmidt really fallen into the Bay and drowned entirely by accident? He wouldn't have been the first to slip or topple off a sea wall. The Harbor Police pulled in bodies every year.

"One thing we can do," Shayne told them then. "There are just four of you left. From now on I

want you to live on what the Boy Scouts used to call the Buddy System when I was a kid. Nobody is to be alone. Even if you go to the toilet, go in pairs. I don't care how you team up — just so long as you *do* team up. Nobody is alone from now on. Wherever you go, your buddy goes with you."

He paused and waited for a reaction.

To his surprise all four of the men nodded. There was no objection.

"That makes sense," Julius Spicer said. "Will you stay in the house with us?"

"I probably can't be here all the time," Shayne said, "but I will as much as possible. Remember, whoever is doing this — if someone really is — hasn't used a gun or a knife. He's made it look like an accident every time. I think the Buddy System will keep him from getting the chance to stage another accident."

"Why hasn't he used a gun?" one of them asked.

"That's easy," Mike Shayne said. "He wants to inherit that money. If all the rest of you were obviously murdered, the police would suspect the sole survivor. A court could keep him from getting any of the money."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Well whoever has been doing the killing — if that is really what has been going on — has thought of it," Shayne said. "Now, I need to know where each of you was during the time Harry Schmidt fell or was pushed into the Bay."

He looked at each of them in turn.

"I was right here in the library, writing checks to pay the monthly household bills." That was Julius Spicer.

"Did anyone see you?"

"No. I was alone."

"I was upstairs, taking my regular midday nap in the bedroom." Sam Browning sounded sincere, and from the look of the old man Mike Shayne could believe he took a regular afternoon snooze.

"I was in the upstairs sunporch watching TV on the set there," Will Meyer said. "As far as I know, nobody even looked in to see me."

"I was out of the house most of the time," George Tuttle said in his turn. "I walked up the street to find a dry cleaning establishment and left the overcoat I wore down on the plane to be cleaned. I thought it was a good chance to get it cleaned while I was down here and wouldn't be wearing it for a couple of days. The cleaner can verify that I was there."

Sure he can, Mike Shayne thought. *You could still have had time to slip down to the Bay and push your pal in while you were out of the house, though.*

He didn't say any of that aloud though.

Instead, he stood where he could see all four of their faces and dropped what he hoped would be a bombshell.

"Which one of you knows a man named Manny Ricco?" he said. "They call him Manny the Boss."

Shayne had hoped for a reaction — but he didn't get it. The old faces showed a mild curiosity or a bland indifference, that was all.

"Who did you say?" George Tuttle asked. "I never heard of the man."

"Neither did I."

"Nor I."

"Not me."

"What does he have to do with this?" Julius asked. "I'm sure nobody with that name was in our original group — although he could have been a relative by marriage or something. Anyway, why ask?"

"There's a possibility the man may have an interest in this affair," Shayne said. "I can't tell you why right now, because I'm not sure myself. I'm still checking the matter out."

None of the men showed further interest. If the name of Manny the Boss meant anything to any one of them, that man was a good actor.

"Okay then," Mike Shayne said. "Now I'm going to have to talk with each of you alone for a few minutes. I'll start with Mr. Spicer. The other three of you go out on the patio through these French Windows and stay together where I can see you. I'll call you in one by one. After that, the Buddy System starts."

VI

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE WAS alone with old Julius Spicer, he got right to the point.

"I'm going to have to ask each of you some straight questions," the big redheaded detective began, "and I'll need equally honest answers."

"I'll try to be honest with you," the old man said. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "After all, it seems to be my life that's at stake."

"I'm glad you recognize that fact," Shayne said. "At first, I didn't really believe anyone was trying to kill you people. Now I do. Three 'accidental' deaths are too many to be just a coincidence."

"I'm glad you recognize that."

"I do," Shayne said. "Now if one of you is the killer, it will be the one with the strongest motive."

"Three million dollars is a pretty strong motive for most people," Spicer said. "I don't really need the money, but even I would like to have it. Of course, that doesn't mean I'd kill for it," he added hastily.

"What I need to know," Shayne said, "is just how well off you are. Rumor has it you lost a lot of your original fortune. How

about it?"

Julius Spicer appeared to think that over. "You *are* a detective if you've already found that out," he said finally.

"And it's true enough, that is up to a point. I lost money — and I have to admit I spent a lot of money over the years. I pamper myself, and I've been extravagant. I've always thought I could afford to be.

"With all of that though, Mr. Shayne, I'm not exactly a poor man yet. I still have a net worth of just a little over a million and a half dollars. It is enough to keep me in comfort for the years I have left.

"I don't see how I could ever spend the three million dollars if it came to me."

"I see what you mean," Shayne said. "Do you know anything about the finances of the other three out there?" He gestured through the windows at the men on the patio.

"Not really," Julius Spicer said. "None of them were really good friends of mine even back in the War days when all of this started. I understand two of them made and lost a lot of money at one time or another, but how much they ended up with I haven't any real idea."

"Which two?" Mike Shayne asked.

"George and Will," old Julius said. "One of them gambled and

the other played the market — which is pretty much the same thing — but for the life of me, I can't remember which was which. You get to be my age, Shayne, and the memory begins to play tricks with you. Anyway, it's an argle-bargle choice — six of one and half a dozen of the other."

"That memory of yours can't come up with anything at all on Sam Browning then?"

"Not about his finances or even what he's been doing with himself. these lasty twenty years. One thing might interest you though. Back in the Argonne days, Sam was the death or glory boy in our outfit. It was Sam who ended up with a chest full of medals. He always was wild."

"That's interesting."

"One more thing," the old man added. "I can't really swear to this, but I seem to remember rumors about Sam. Yes, they were quite some rumors."

The old man stopped and seemed to be listening to voices out of the past inside his head.

"What sort of rumors?" The big detective pressed him for an answer.

"Wild tales," Old Julius said in a low tone. "Wild stories for sure, but they did seem to fit Sam. I heard he was mixed up with the bootleggers. You remember, it was Volstead Act days after the War.

"They said Sam had a fleet of fast boats to bring the booze in from ships to the Long Island shore near New York. He would have been just the boy for that sort of a wild life.

"Still that was long ago. Fifty years back at least. I don't suppose it would mean much of anything now."

His voice trailed away as if he had tired from so much talking.

Mike Shayne didn't think a year or two with the rum runners would signify a great deal either. Manny the Boss would have been a kid in knickerbocker pants back then — that was, if Manny the Boss had ever been a kid.

Still, the story gave an unexpected insight into the character of Sam L. Browning.

He decided to talk to Browning next.

Shayne went out on the patio and called Browning aside. They walked far enough from the others so their talk couldn't be overheard, and Shayne asked the man substantially the same questions he had put to Julius Spicer — except that he didn't mention the rum-running rumors.

On the surface at least, Sam Browning was surprisingly frank and open.

He even admitted to having been "a bit of a wild one right after the War when we were all young and foolish," though without going so far as to say exactly what he had been up to.

Shayne didn't press him about that.

For the past forty years, Browning had owned and run a sporting goods store in suburban Long Island, New York. He still owned the business, though most of the actual operation these days was in the hands of his son and two grandsons.

"That's how I was able to get away and come down here," he told Mike Shayne.

"As to the financial side of things, the business pays me a good living, but that's about all. I won't say I wouldn't have painted the town a good bright red with three million dollars a few years ago." He chuckled and slapped his thigh. "The trouble

is, now I'm too old. Yessir, I'm just too old to do real justice to that kind of moola. I'll take the money if I should outlast the rest of the boys — but I'll be damned if I'll really know what to do with it."

Mike Shayne thought that was a practical attitude to take — but it didn't help to solve the case for him.

The stories he got from George Tuttle and Will Meyer were much alike.

The men described themselves as "investors" and both claimed the be still active. They drew Social Security and claimed some income from investments.

"Naturally, we don't tell the government exactly how much." Both of them said that with the same air of sly superiority.

Both claimed to be able to get by — but Shayne sensed tension when the three-million-dollar jackpot was mentioned. These two might not know exactly what to do with that much money — but they obviously were aching to find out.

Shayne figured that, if either of them got the money, it would go the way of all they had made in the past. It would be gambled away in a vain attempt to make even more.

Of course, none of the men had a really valid alibi for the time of the death of Harry Schmidt. Shayne suspected the same would prove true of the times of death for Seymour and Phil. On the other hand, he couldn't really place any of the old men at the scenes of those deaths.

They might all have motive — but it would be very hard, if not impossible, to either prove or disprove opportunity.

Next Shayne talked to the elderly couple who lived in the Spicer home as servants. Old John was house man and gardener and his wife Sarah cooked and cleaned. They had not noticed anything unusual that day. No help at all . . .

The only remaining person to talk to was Julius's nephew Sam. The young man drove into the driveway just as Shayne finished talking to the servants.

Sam told Shayne he had been shopping on Lincoln Road and was carrying some packages to prove it.

Sam Spicer was a much younger edition of his uncles. He had been the late child of the third marriage of Julius's younger brother. Mike Shayne guessed his age as about thirty — give or take a couple of years.

He was a dark, intense young man with an air of tightly reined composure. He wore a conservative sports shirt, jacket and slacks.

"I'm the only relative Uncle Julius has left — blood relative, that is. Someday this house will be mine and I think it only right to look after the old man for his few remaining months or years."

Sam had graduated from the University of Miami Law School and been admitted to the Florida Bar.

"I haven't set up an office or tried to build a practice yet," he told the detective. "Time enough for that sort of thing after Uncle Julius passes on. Meanwhile, my first obligation is to the old man."

Shayne just nodded.

Sam Spicer asked about the precautions Shayne was taking to protect the old men. He nodded a strong approval when the big redheaded detective told him about the Buddy System he had instituted.

"That makes good sense," he said. "I agree with you that whichever one of them is doing the killings has got to make them look like accidents in order to inherit the three million. The Florida courts would never let him benefit from people he'd murdered."

He looked thoughtful for a minute, then said, "Are you sure the killer is one of these men? Couldn't it be someone who hopes to benefit from seeing one of them get the jackpot? A relative? Or perhaps a debtor even? I may sound pretty far out to you . . ."

"To tell you the truth, I'm not sure of anything at this point — not even if there *is* a killer, though the evidence seems to point that way," Mike Shayne said.

At that moment the phone rang nearby. Moments later old Sarah came into the room.

"It's for you, Mr. Shayne. You can take it in the library. A Mr. Ricco is calling."

VII

WHEN SHAYNE PUT THE PHONE to his ear and grunted a hello he recognized the rasping tones on the other end of the wire.

"This is Manny Ricco," the voice said. "I got to have another talk with you, Shayne."

"I don't have to talk to you," Mike Shayne told the other man.

"Okay, okay," Manny the Boss said. "I'm sorry about sending my boys before. They ain't got sense enough to know who to treat how. This time I'm calling you on the phone like a gent, ain't I? It's just for a talk, Shayne, and it could mean a lot for your own good."

"Is that a threat?" Shayne asked.

"Look here, you dumb shamus," the little Boss snarled back at him over the phone, "when I threaten somebody, he don't have to ask about it. He knows what's about. No, I said I just want to talk to you and that's all it is."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"You'll find that out when we talk," Ricco said. "Look, there's a bar called the Orange Tree not far from where you are now. Do you know it?"

"I know it."

"Okay then. You meet me there

in a half an hour from now. We talk. If you like what you hear, it can maybe do you a lot of good. If you don't — then at least you had your chance and the rest is on your own head. Okay?"

"I'll meet you," Mike Shayne said.

He didn't really like the idea of the meeting, but decided to go ahead with it anyway. There seemed no harm in letting the little loan shark talk.

He might say something that would give the big detective a clue through the dark labyrinth the case had become. Right then, Mike Shayne needed every scrap of information he could get.

Sam Spicer was waiting for him in the hall when he turned away from the phone. There was an expression of serious resolve on the young man's face.

"I'd like a word with you, Mr. Shayne."

"Fire ahead, but make it short — I have to go out for a while."

"Okay," young Sam said. "There was just one thing on my mind. I like this Buddy System idea you've set up of no one of them being alone. In fact I think it's a real good idea."

"Thanks."

"Just one thing, though. I want to add myself to whoever else is acting as buddy for Uncle Julius — make myself sort of a third wheel on that team if you know what I mean."

"I don't see any objection to that," Shayne said.

"Thanks. Uncle Julius has been real good to me all my life. I think it's only natural for me to want to take care of him now, when there seems to be a real danger to his life. I want to help all I can."

"Okay," Mike Shayne said. "You go ahead and mount guard on your uncle. Only one thing, though. If you see anything suspicious, don't try to deal with it yourself. You come and get me instead. I'll take any action that has to be done."

"I'll do that."

"Be sure that you do," Mike Shayne told the young man. "Don't ever forget I'm the professional here."

He hoped the young man would remember that. He also hoped Sam L. Browning would remember. An ex-bootlegger and war hero could be capable of violence that, at his age, could do more harm than good. That is — if Browning wasn't the killer himself.

When there was violence in the air, Mike Shayne preferred to do all the fighting there was to be done by himself.

The big man decided to walk to the Orange Tree Bar instead of taking his car. The place was only a few blocks from Julius Spicer's home and the walk would give him a chance to stretch his legs and get in some much needed thinking.

Shayne had already decided to

spend the night at the Spicer house. He didn't want to leave his four remaining charges to their own devices through the hours of darkness.

The Orange Tree Bar was one of those small, side street bars which serve their neighborhoods as a place to drink, to meet other men's wives (and vice versa) and as a handy place for the neighborhood bookie to operate.

At this time of the afternoon, there were only a few cars in the parking lot. Much of the business would be of the walk-in sort anyway.

Shayne recognized a shiny and very expensive foreign made sedan as the sort Manny the Boss would be likely to drive.

When he pushed his way through the swinging doors into the dimly lit bar and lounge area of the Orange Tree however, Manny Ricco was nowhere in sight.

The big detective stood and looked around. He didn't have long to wait.

A middle aged — tending to blowzy — cocktail waitress in a costume that wasn't either quite topless or bottomless came over to where he was standing.

"If you're Mike Shayne, come with me. The man you're looking for is waiting for you upstairs."

"I'm Shayne," the big man said. "He thought he recognized the woman but wasn't sure. "You're looking good since the last time," he said.

She shot him a surprised look. "I didn't think you'd remember me, big boy." Then, under her breath, and speaking out of the corner of her mouth so he could barely hear the words. "Watch yourself, Mike."

"I will. Thanks." He too spoke in tones that could not be overheard.

The woman led him through a door flush with the wall near one end of the bar and down a hallway. On one side was a kitchen and on the other a door into what was probably the gambling room and bookie's office.

At the end of the hall was a door and, back of the door, a flight of stairs leading up to the building's second floor.

The woman led him up the stairs, waggling her broad hips at him as she mounted. She didn't try to say any more to him — nor did Shayne speak to her. This sort of place could be very efficiently bugged. From her silence, he assumed that she knew it was.

At the top of the stairs, there was another long hall, this time running all the way to the front of the building. The woman knocked on the door at the front of the hall on the right side facing the street.

The door swung open and Shayne walked in.

Manny the Boss Ricco was holding the door.

He said, "Bring us some drinks,

honey," to the woman and motioned Mike Shayne into the room.

It was an office with a desk, a couple of easy chairs and a long leather couch. Elaborate drapes were drawn tight over windows which looked out onto the street. A couple of nudes painted on velvet instead of canvas adorned the walls.

Mike Shayne took the easy chair in the corner over by the windows. It kept a blank wall at his back for security and let him cover the door and the whole room.

"You're a real careful man," Manny the Boss said as he sat down behind the big desk. There were papers piled on its glass top and, under one of the piles, Mike Shayne could make out the outline of a flat automatic pistol.

Shayne was sure he could get his own gun out of its belt holster before Ricco would be able to snatch the automatic from under the papers. At this point anyway, he didn't expect any gunplay.

The woman came back with drinks on a tray.

Mike Shayne made no motion to take his, and she put the tray on the desk and left the room.

Ricco laughed and tasted both drinks. "See?" he said. "No mickey. Nothing but good Bourbon. I said I just wanted to talk."

Shayne took his drink then. He sniffed and tasted. Ricco was right. Only good Bourbon whiskey. He drank some and went back to his chair.

"Okay then," the detective said, "it's your dime. Go ahead and speak your piece. I'm ready to listen."

"I'll put the cards right on the table," Ricco said. The little man got up and began to pace back and forth. His heels clicked on the parquet floor of the office except when he crossed the throw rug someone had put down halfway between desk and door.

"I think we both know what this is about," Ricco continued. "You got five old boys in that house down there — real shmoes — all of them older than Santa Claus and ready to pop off any day now.

"It's a race, and you know and I know what the race is about. The winner gets to keep three million dollars — and all the losers get is funerals.

"They are all scared to death — and just between you and me, Shayne, I think they got a right to be. It looks like somebody has been giving the winner a helping hand."

"That somebody wouldn't be you, would it?" Mike Shayne asked. He took a cigar out of his pocket and lit it with a wooden match.

"No, that somebody ain't me," Manny the Boss said as he went on pacing the floor. "I told you that once before and you should ought to of believed me. I'm serious about this."

"If it isn't you," Mike Shayne asked, "then what are you doing

in the picture at all? It doesn't make sense to me so far. Are you a relative and potential heir? I doubt that."

"You can go ahead and doubt it," Ricco said. "All the relatives I've got are good Sicilians — which those old gophers ain't."

"More likely, one of them is on the hook to you for a two-thousand-dollar loan in nineteen thirty-eight which is now up to two million dollars with compound usury and all." Shayne was taking a long shot there, but one he believed to fit the facts of the case so far. He got no reaction at all from the little hood except a snort.

"I wish that was it. I swear to God, Shayne, I'd like that — only my man would have collected a long time ago in that case. The rest of your clients would all be in boxes and pushing up daisies. No. You listen to me now, and I'll tell you. Just once I'll tell you, and you damn well better believe me."

"I'll do my best," Mike Shayne said. He didn't really sound as if he meant it.

"You *got* to believe me," Manny the Boss said, "because this is the truth."

"I said I'd try."

"All right now. What am I, Shayne? I mean what is my business that makes my living for me? I'm a gambler, is what. I make book and I make bets is what I do. Because I'm a big shot I make big bets."

The little hood paused and looked at the glass in his hand. It was empty.

"Where the hell is that girl. She know enough to bring more liquor."

He looked back from his empty glass to the big redhead.

Shayne emptied his own glass. He would have called Ricco anything but a gambler — but he figured just then he'd better keep his mouth shut.

"Well," Manny the Boss said, "sometime back, the word gets out around the Big Apple about these old geezers sitting around watching for each other to die. A lot of people is laughing about it. Then, just for the hell of it, some of us starts making bets on who will win."

That really rocked Mike Shayne. He said, "Oh, *no!*" in almost awed tone.

Manny Ricco said, "Oh *yes*, Shayne. It's me who ends up making book on these old bums. I got book and I got big bets of my own. There is big money riding on this, Shayne. Big Money with a big B and a big M. I am right in the middle. I got a lot to lose by this time if the wrong guy lives to the end. Do you see?"

"I see you just gave me a motive for murder," Shayne said to him. "I wasn't sure about that before, but you just handed it to me on a silver platter. That wasn't very smart."

Manny the Boss Ricco almost

doubled the speed of his trotting back and forth across the office. His voice went up to a near shout.

"Motive, *hell!*" he yelled at Shayne. "What I gave you was the reason I got to keep my hands off this whole business. There are people in this that would have my throat cut in a minute if they thought I was monkeying with them old men. I can't do nothing to change the odds even — let alone the results without I am a dead man myself. That you got to believe, Shayne."

"I don't know," Shayne said. "It's just as easy to believe you want everybody killed off but your own horse in this race. If not, why are you trying to get me out of the picture? Suppose you tell me that?"

"Sure I'll tell you that," Manny the Boss shouted. "You're the wild card, Shayne. You're the item nobody figured in when the odds were set and the bets went into the book. I know your reputation. As long as you stay in the picture, anything can change. That's why."

"Gambler's luck, friend," Shayne said over his cigar.

"Gambler's luck your foot!" the venomous little loanshark snarled. "You ain't no dumbo from the sticks, Shayne. You know there ain't no such thing as luck except for the marks out for a day at the track.

"Us gamblers — us real gamblers — play by the odds and not

by no such thing as luck. The odds was set before you come into the picture, pal. You could change them. Don't you see?"

"Maybe," Mike Shayne said. "What I *don't* see is why you are in such a sweat unless you're killing those men off yourself. If I change the odds, I could change them your way just as well as any other, couldn't I?"

"That would be just as bad," Ricco said. "It could even be worse. Somebody could say I hired you to set things up my way. I'm dealing with some very suspicious people, Shayne. If they thought I had done that — well I

tell you there'd be a contract out on me in no time at all. I don't want that. I can't have that."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"That is the big sixty-four-dollar question," said Manny the Boss. "That is the one I been asking myself all day.

"When I saw you in the shyster's office, I was ready to buy you off, Shayne. You didn't want to play ball then and I suppose you ain't changed your mind now."

"No," the big man said, "to coin a phrase, I ain't."

"It would make things a lot easier. I could even toss in a nice bonus."

"It would be and you probably could," Mike Shayne said. "The trouble is, it would upset the habits of a lifetime. I never sold out a client yet. If it got out that I had, it would spoil my business. Nobody would trust me again, so nobody would hire me. You see?"

"You could make a big living on our side of the fence," said the Boss. "Better than you do now. How about it, pal."

Mike Shayne said only, "No thanks, pal."

There was silence for a moment while both men thought the situation over.

It was broken by Manny Ricco.

"Then I ain't got no choice but to move you out of the picture some other way."

"What way would you have in mind?" Mike Shayne was braced to pull his gun in a split microsecond if he had to. Ricco was out of reach of the gun on the desk. He might have one under his jacket, but Shayne wasn't afraid of that. Men like the Boss left the killing up to soldiers in their gangs. Those killings meant a shot in the back. There was no need to use a fast draw — so no need to learn one.

He braced himself for whatever might come next.

Ricco looked at his glass. It was empty.

"Where the hell is that broad?" he blurted. "I told her to keep the whiskey coming."

He went over to his desk and pushed a button which would sound a buzzer somewhere on the lower floor. That should have alerted Shayne. There should have been a bottle someplace in the office.

The detective was watching Ricco's hand move near the gun under the papers. It took up his full attention.

"What I better do is keep you here for a while, Shayne," Manny the Boss explained. "If somebody is already busy killing them old buzzards, let him go ahead. When there's only one left, I won't need to hold on to you any more. You just take it easy for a couple of days. You can have anything you want — food, booze, even a broad if you want one. Be my guest. When it's over, you can go home."

Shayne wondered about that, though he was fairly sure Ricco would let him go. What could he prove? By then the last man would already have been determined.

There was just one hitch.

Mike Shayne pointed it out.

"Suppose this killer isn't in any hurry? He could take weeks or months before he tries again. You can't keep me here that long."

"I won't have to," Ricco said. "If there is a killer, he hasn't got that sort of time. Those men are all so old any one of them could pop off from natural causes any minute. The killer don't dare wait. His man could be the first to go that way — and then he'd have lost everything."

"You have a point there," Mike Shayne conceded.

"Sure I have. I keep you a few days. If nothing more happens in that time, then I think about what to do next."

"Only one thing wrong with that."

"What could that be, pal?"

"I'm not staying," Mike Shayne said.

That was when they both heard a knock on the office door.

Ricco called, "Come in."

It was the cocktail waitress from the Orange Tree Bar downstairs. She was carrying a tray on her right arm. On the tray were a couple of bottles and an ice bucket.

Manny the Boss said, "Okay, honey. You know what to do with that stuff."

It was the wrong thing to say. He should have just snatched a bottle off the tray.

Mike Shayne realized that a second too late.

When the girl put the tray down he saw her right hand.

It held a small but deadly automatic pistol which was pointed right at the detective.

"Freeze!" Manny the Boss said and got his own gun off the top of the desk.

VIII

THEY HAD MIKE SHAYNE COLD and he knew it.

For one of the very few times in his life he had been guilty of the crime of overconfidence. He had been watching the little loan shark so carefully that he had failed to consider that the girl might have a gun, too.

They made him stand up and face the wall and put his hands up high and lean on the wall.

Then the girl, Dolly, took his big gun out of its holster above and behind his right hip and gave it to her Boss. Outside of taking the gun, she didn't even frisk him.

Manny the Boss apparently didn't notice that.

Mike Shayne did.

The girl had seemed friendly before — and this was certainly another sign of friendship. He had a wallet with his identification and about four hundred dollars in

cash in his pocket. He had a cigarette lighter and a box of wooden matches and some cigarettes.

He was wearing a heavy leather belt with a big brass buckle and an extra clip of bullets for his Colt. He had a lock-back folding hunter's pocket knife with a four inch blade.

Dolly did not take any of these things. She didn't even search the big detective. She just took his gun and gave it to the Boss. For the moment that was enough.

It left Mike Shayne still a very dangerous man.

"For right now, I'm going to leave you here, Shayne," Ricco said. "The windows are bullet-proof glass and they don't open. There's a washroom." He jerked his thumb at a door in the wall. "It's got no windows. You'll be locked in. The broad here will bring you up booze and something to eat from the kitchen."

"You're making a bad mistake, Manny," Mike Shayne told the man.

"Now I got all the guns — call me Mister Ricco."

Mike Shayne ignored that remark. He figured it didn't deserve an answer.

"I got to think things over like I told you, Shayne," little Manny repeated. "The big thing is, you don't get a chance to screw things up — or leastways nobody gets a reason to blame me for letting you do that."

He paused for a moment. Then, "You don't know how lucky you are it's me that's got you, Shayne, and not some of my associates in this betting pool. I'm the only one of the lot who wouldn't get rid of you by just getting your throat cut and the carcass put out with the garbage. You should ought to be grateful to me, shamus. Here I give you all the comforts of home."

If Ricco expected thanks from Mike Shayne, he didn't get any.

"Okay, have it your way," he said. "Come on, Dolly."

The little man went out — pushing the woman ahead of him.

Shayne could hear the click as the door was locked from the other side. For the moment, he just sat where he was in the chair. If there was a peephole or the room was bugged, he wanted to seem resigned to his fate.

Mike Shayne went on smoking his cigaret and thinking about the danger to the four frightened men in the house a few blocks away.

He hadn't argued with the story Manny the Boss had just given him. It suited the big detective to have Ricco think he was being believed.

Shayne was pretty sure he knew why he had been given the tale of the betting pool. It would keep him from nosing out the real facts behind what was going on. It was a good story. It was even reasonably plausible.

Mike Shayne didn't believe a word of it.

Neither did he believe that Manny Ricco was the killer of the old men or that one of his close associates was doing the hits. A couple of things Ricco had said during the conversation had convinced Shayne of that.

If there had been a betting pool, Ricco (or any of the other bettors) would have been perfectly capable of doing the killings with his own hands.

One thing was clear to Shayne.

Manny the Boss *did* want him out of the case. He *did* have a reason to want to see one of the old men outlive the others.

He would already have stacked the deck in favor of his candidate to win the macabre endurance contest. A man like Manny the Boss never bet on a race unless it was fixed in advance.

He was afraid that Shayne would spoil his plans.

Shayne had every intention of doing just that.

He heard the sound of the door to Ricco's office being unlocked from the outside.

Under other circumstances, Mike Shayne would have been across the room in a flash, ready to explode out into the hall through that door as soon as it was opened.

This time, he decided to wait.

As he had expected it was the woman, Dolly, who came into the room carrying a tray.

There was a plate with steak and potatoes and a bottle of good brandy on the tray when she set it down on the desk. There was also a note which read —

This room bugged. Nod your head if you will help me if I help you. Make out like you're eating the steak, but don't eat any.

Mike Shayne nodded his head at the girl and smiled.

She smiled back.

Shayne rattled his knife and fork on the plate as if he was eating. He knew now that the room was bugged but there wasn't any peephole or other way by which he could be watched.

Dolly took a pad and pen from the desk and began to write.

Shayne said, "Thanks. I was hungry. I didn't have any lunch. What are they going to do with me?"

She said aloud, "I don't know, and if I did I wouldn't tell *you*. You're in real bad trouble, mister."

All the while she was busily writing on the pad. When she finished she passed it to the big detective.

It read,

After a while, I'll knock to be let out. You be right behind me. There'll be one man in the hall with a gun. If you get past him, follow me. Don't try to get down the stairs. You can't make it. Follow me."

Mike Shayne nodded. He wrote

on the pad, *What sort of help do you need?*

She said, "My son's in prison and coming up for parole. Manny said he could fix it."

Her eyes questioned Mike Shayne.

He wrote on the pad, *I'll do what I can.*

Then he took the sheet of paper off the pad and lit it with a match and burned it in an ashtray.

When the note was burned, Mike Shayne smiled at the woman.

She smiled back and suddenly leaped over and kissed him full on the mouth. Her lips were hot and experienced. She slid down and sat in his lap.

With her lips almost touching his she whispered, "They can't hear us this way. Besides I like this. We got to kill some time before I try to leave."

They killed some time — quite pleasantly for both of them.

In about ten minutes, after scuffling about loudly enough to be heard over the concealed bug, they both got up out of the chair.

"I got to go now, honey," Dolly said loudly. "The bar is busy and I'm supposed to work here."

"I thought you were supposed to make me happy, too," Shayne said. "That's what the little rat said."

"Don't call him that. He's the Boss," Dolly told him. "Honest, dear, I got to work. If you want, though, I can come back after I go off duty at midnight. Would you like that, dear? There ain't no bed here, but the couch can make do. We won't care anyway."

"Sure we won't," Shayne replied.

She giggled and kissed him again and then picked up the tray in such a way that the dished clattered. Against his ear she whispered, "The steak was doped — remember? They expect you to pass out in a few minutes."

The she got up and walked over to the door with her heels tapping on the floor.

Mike Shayne, moving as quietly as a stalking cat, was ahead of her. He put himself flat against the wall where the door would crack open.

Dolly pulled the door wide open.

There was a guard lounging against the wall across the narrow hall. He had a gun but it was stuck in his belt instead of in his hand where it should have been. He expected to see the woman carry the tray out of the hall.

He never had a chance.

Mike Shayne was across the hall and on the sentinel with a speed of which few men were capable.

His big left hand took the guard by the throat and slammed the back of his head against the wall with a force that almost shattered the back of his skull.

At the same instant, Shayne's right hand pulled the gun out of the guard's belt.

He kept his grip on the man and

lowered him to the floor. He found another clip of bullets for the .38 caliber automatic in one jacket pocket and appropriated it.

He moved easily and calmly. Armed and ready, Mike Shayne felt once more in full control of the situation.

Dolly said, "Hurry." Then she said, "*Oh, my God!*"

One of the other hoods of Manny the Boss's trio had come up the stairs at the end of the hall. He was probably en route to relieve his pal on guard duty and at first didn't grasp the meaning of what he saw as the hall itself was only dimly lit.

Dolly moved a few steps down the hall to a door almost opposite the office and pulled it open. Shayne was right behind her.

The guard down the hall called out.

Mike Shayne grabbed the metal tray of dishes which Dolly was still holding and threw it down the hall with all his force.

The dishes fell off, but the metal tray flew like a discus. It hit the hood on the forehead with enough power to make him drop his gun and fall backwards out of sight down the stairs.

Mike Shayne followed Dolly through the door she had opened. The room was used for private games. There was an octagonal poker table covered with a green sheet. Nobody was there.

There was a heavy bolt on the inside of the door and Shayne used it to lock the room.

Dolly was over at the window. This one opened onto a metal fire escape. In seconds, they were both on the ground in an alley that ran along the side of the Orange Tree Bar.

IX

MIKE SHAYNE AND DOLLY got out of the alley before anyone in the Orange Tree Bar realized what was up. Once on the busy streets of Miami Beach they had nothing to worry about.

Shayne walked the woman the few blocks over to Collins Avenue and made a call to Lucy Hamilton from a pay booth in a drugstore.

Then he rejoined Dolly, who was waiting for him at a table.

"I've called my secretary," he said and wrote Lucy Hamilton's name and address on a piece of paper. "I'm going to put you in a cab and send you over to spend the next couple of nights with her. We'll work out a place for you to stay and another job. I'll see what I can do for your son. I know a lot of people with political clout."

"I figured you did."

"If they want to, they can help you more than Manny Ricco ever could. It'll depend on what he's in for, of course, and what sort of record he has."

"He's a good boy," Dolly said. "He was drinking and got in trouble and got caught."

"Now," Mike Shayne said,

"what do you know about that cock-and-bull story Manny was giving me back in the office? Why did he really want to hold me prisoner?"

"To tell you the truth," she said, "I don't really know nothing about all that. I was just the waitress. He gave me the gun and told me to hold it on you because you wouldn't be watching me."

"Next time I'll watch even a kid in short pants," Mike Shayne said ruefully. "Go on."

"That's it. I know Manny owns the bar or has a mortgage on it or something. He don't usually show up here but once a year. Some way, he's got bread in those old birds you're hired to look after. I honestly don't know how or why, but the way he acts it's a lot of money."

"One more thing," Shayne asked. "Has he mentioned any of those men by name in your hearing? Do you know anything about any of them?"

She gave him a level look. "I'm sorry, but I got to say I don't know nothing about that. I hear his men talk about how their boss stands to cop a bundle, but they don't never mention no names. As far as I know none of those old men ever came into the Orange Tree. Me — I couldn't pick one of them out of a lineup at the old folks' home. I wish I could help you, but I just can't."

"That's okay," the big private detective told her and reached over and patted her hand. "So far today you've done just fine in the help-me department. Now I want you safe out of the way while I wind up a few details. I hope, by this time tomorrow, little Manny will be in no shape to worry about you. Till then, Lucy Hamilton will take care of you."

He put the woman in a cab and gave her a hundred dollars with the promise of more to come. Then he watched to be sure no one was tailing the cab as it drove off. Nobody was.

then Shayne walked back to the Julius Spicer home. He intended to stay on guard there through the night.

Shayne was now certain that the case of the four frightened old men in the Spicer mansion was coming to a head. He believed that at least one of the recent deaths among the survivors of the Last Man club had been deliberate, planned, cold blooded murder one. Maybe all of them had been.

The presence of Manny the Boss Ricco proved that, whether or not the little hood had done the actual murders himself. He was the vulture drawn by the smell of imminent death.

Now that Mike Shayne was in the picture — particularly now that Shayne had escaped from the Orange Tree Bar — the killer's hand was forced.

He had to either bring the whole thing to a head and finish the killing or get out and leave the en-

durance contest to come to a natural finish.

Shayne was certain that the killer would not stand back now. He was in too deep. He had too much to lose to take such a chance.

He would strike — and strike soon. Shayne expected a crisis before the coming night had passed.

The big private detective was confident that he could deal with the situation successfully. The killer was limited by his need to make the deaths seem accidental — even more so by the sudden need for speed.

That meant a crash program of accidents. There were only certain directions this could take.

Mike Shayne was making his plans to counter any one of these directions. By the time he turned off the sidewalk into the driveway of the Spicer mansion, his mind was made up.

Old Sarah met him at the doorway and told him that all four of the old men had decided to take an afternoon nap.

"I think they're afraid of what may happen tonight and want to rest and build up their strength," the old woman said.

"I'm here to take care of anything that could happen tonight," Shayne said.

"I'm glad of that," she said. "John and I were both worried when you were gone so long."

According to the Buddy System Mike Shayne had recommended,

the old men had retired in pairs. Julius Spicer and Will Meyer were respectively on the bed and couch in the master suite. Sam Browning and George Tuttle were resting on the twin beds in the Tuttle guest room.

"Where is Mr. Sam Spicer?" Shayne asked.

"He's out in the patio," watching the back of the house," the old woman said.

"Thanks. I think I'll have a word with him."

X

MIKE SHAYNE FOUND Sam Spicer walking near the shrubbery that lined the rock wall at the rear of the extensive grounds.

"I don't really know what I'm doing out here," the young man said. "I just thought I ought to look things over for any sign of prowlers."

"Find anything?" the big redhead was pretty sure what the answer would be even before he asked. .

"Nothing," young Spicer said almost apologetically. "I guess it is rather foolish of me, but I've been badly on edge the last few days. You know how it is . . ."

"I know how it is," Shayne said. "While we're out here, suppose you show me around the grounds. Point out anything I might need to know in case there's trouble tonight."

They made a tour of the grounds together. The lawn and hedges were typical for a big old house in that area of residential Miami Beach.

The house itself was vulnerable to a break-in. There were a big front door, a kitchen door, sliding glass doors to the Florida room, windows that would hardly slow up even the most amateur of burglars. All of these Shayne had expected.

There was one extra feature however. That was a door on the left rear corner as he faced the house from the yard. It was a solid wooden door, fastened by a heavy iron hasp and padlock on the outside.

"What's that?" Shayne asked.

"It used to be a laundry room" Sam Spicer said, "but there are just hand tubs in there, so they aren't used any more. Uncle Julius had an electric washer and dryer put in the garage. Actually, most of the laundry is sent out, but Sarah does a few things there. I doubt if the old washroom is opened twice a year. It's just used to store a lot of old junk of one sort or another.

"I see," Mike Shayne nodded.

He reached out and gave the padlock a hard shake. It was firmly locked and the screws held the hasp solidly.

The doors to the Florida room weren't nearly as secure. Shayne could have pulled the locks right out of the door frame if he had half-tried.

They finished their inspection and went back inside the house.

By this time, the four old men had wakened from their naps and come downstairs. They were sleepy, nervous and very jumpy indeed.

All four of them spent the afternoon together in the library. Sam Spicer stayed with them.

Mike Shayne continued to prowl the house like a restless panther that scents danger on the wind. He wanted to fix the location of every door and window and large piece of furniture in his mind.

If action came, he was pretty sure that it would be in the dark.

Dinner in the big dining room of the Spicer home was a restrained and solemn meal — nor was it brightened by Sarah's uninspired beef and boiled potatoes.

Old Julius was the only one even to attempt a conversation — and only his nephew and the big redhead joined in. It was not a lively half hour.

The fear was so thick it was almost like fog in the room.

After dinner, the men turned on television in the library and sat watching till after eleven o'clock. Mike Shayne was surprised they could stay awake so long — or would have been if he hadn't realized that fear was keeping them alert.

The situation was not helped by a series of "blood and violence" shows on the big color tube.

They kept up the Buddy System. When one of the men left the room for any reason, his buddy went along.

Finally they decided to go to bed.

Shayne escorted Sam Browning and George Tuttle to their room, searched the room while they waited and checked the windows. He asked them not to lock the door.

"If anything happens in the night," he said, "I'm going to have to get in, and you're going to have to get out. Leave a light on and prop a chair against the inside of the door, so it will fall over and wake you if anyone tries to come in."

"We'll take turns staying awake and watching," George Tuttle said.

Shayne nodded.

Then he walked down the hall to give the same instructions to Julius Spicer and Will Meyer. Sam Spicer had gone with these two, but he left their room when Mike Shayne did.

"I'm going out and do a sentry go on the grounds for a while. When I come in, I'll make enough noise so you'll hear me. I have my own key, so it won't be necessary to leave a door unlocked."

"These doors are practically unlocked anyway," Shayne said. "Keep in touch."

The big private detective had no intention of going to sleep himself that night. He had a pretty good idea that, before dawn, an attempt would be made on the lives of at least three of the old men.

He wasn't sure which three.

He did, by now, have an educated guess as to how the attack would be made. It had to look like an accident, and it had to kill. That narrowed the field.

Mike Shayne kept on the move in an effort to maintain his watch on both floors of the big house. If he had a headquarters, it was the stairway connecting the two floors.

About one in the morning, the detective was just outside the Spicer master bedroom when the light in the hall went out. The light which had been on in the bedroom went out.

The master switch by the fuse box had been pulled and every light in the big house was out.

Mike Shayne started for the stairway. Any other man would have raced down the broad flight of steps and broken his neck as a result.

Shayne moved with the innate caution bred in by years at a dangerous and demanding trade. He took one step at a time and felt out before him with both hands and feet.

Even in the dark, he located the chair which had been put on the steps to trip and send him headlong down to the ground floor.

He picked up the chair and hurled it ahead of him.

Some heavy object, used as a club, hit the chair in mid-air and shattered the wooden back.

Mike Shayne was right behind. He grabbed at the club and missed. Whoever held it swung backhand and hit Shayne a glancing blow on the left shoulder. The weapon felt like a piece of two-by-four building lumber.

Shayne lunged again on the pitch-black stairs.

His attacker was too fast. He twisted back out of reach and at the same time thrust his club between Mike Shayne's legs.

The big man fell sideways and broke the light wooden balustrade edging the stair. He fell heavily to the lower hall. It was a drop of only about four feet from where he went through the rail — but he lit on his side with some force and hit his head on the floor.

Mike Shayne wasn't really knocked out, but he was dazed and it took a moment for him to scramble to his feet. In that time, his assailant had vanished. Shayne couldn't even be sure if he had gone up the stairs or stayed on the ground floor. The whole house was still pitch black.

Shayne stood for the moment, braced against the wall and pulling himself back to full alertness.

That was when the thing he had been fearing and waiting for all night took place.

The big man smelled smoke. It wasn't tobacco smoke. It was the smell of wood burning. Somewhere, the big house was on fire.

Mike Shayne didn't try to locate the blaze.

He raced up the stairs to where the four old men waited in their bedrooms. This time, he carried a small flashlight powered by a rechargeable cell. It was part of his regular equipment.

The beam of light showed that

a key had been put in the outside of the lock on the door to the Tuttle bedroom.

Shayne hadn't used the little flash when the lights first went out for fear of revealing his position to an attacker. Now it came in very handy indeed.

He unlocked the door and told the two old men inside to come out in the hall and wait for him to lead them down the stairs to safety.

The big man started down the hall towards the master bedroom, but halfway there he met Sam Spicer, carrying his uncle over his shoulder.

"Get him outside," Mike Shayne yelled. "Where is Meyer?"

"I don't know," Sam said. "All I saw was Uncle Julius."

By this time smoke was coming up the stairwell. It was heavy and greasy.

"Cover your noses everybody," Shayne yelled.

He ran on into the master bedroom, where he found Will Meyer lying unconscious on his bed. The old man was small and thin, so that it was no job for Mike Shayne to pick him up and carry him out.

A couple of minutes later, all the people from the house were safely out on the lawn. John and Sarah came hurrying from their apartment over the garage.

Fire engines, called by the neighbors, were turning into the driveway.

A black and white police patrol car followed the fire department, but Mike Shayne said nothing to the officers about the fears of the old men. He saw that all four, with John and Sarah and Sam Spicer, were taken into the servants' apartment.

Following the firemen he discovered that the fire had started inside the locked storage room and eaten its way through the wall into the kitchen. The heavy greasy smoke had been caused by rags and other detritus feeding the fire.

That was all the Mike Shayne needed to know. He still had the gun he had taken from the guard at the Orange Tree Bar, and he tucked it under his belt before he went up the stairs to the servants' quarters.

All of the people there were dazed with shock except for Sam Spicer, who was tending and com-

forting old Julius. The lights in this detached garage building were functioning perfectly. Outside police and firemen were still busy with the last of the fire.

"You can all relax," Shayne said to the people in the room. "The danger is over."

"The fire?"

"Not just the fire," Mike Shayne said. "I mean all the danger. You four men are going to be able to live out your normal spans of life without fear of murder or artificially created accidents. I know now what has been going on and who has been behind it."

Most of them looked too dazed to comprehend, but old Julius Spicer kept his wits about him.

"There *have* been murders and you know who committed them?" he said.

"That's right," Shayne said. "This fire gives me the answer to both parts of your question. First of all, the fire was no accident. It was the only way the killer could dispose of three of you at one time and make it look like an accident.

"Once I realized that my presence in this house was forcing the killer to strike, it wasn't hard to figure that fire had to be his weapon. It was the only weapon that could 'accidentally' kill three of the survivors in one night."

"Suppose you're right?" Tuttle asked. "How could he be sure the fire would kill the three he wanted dead and leave the one he wished to live?"

"Easily," Shayne said. "I'll come to that. A killer always has to have both motive and opportunity. In this case I looked for motive first."

They were all ears now, listening to him intently.

"Just offhand," Shayne said, "most people would say three million dollars would be motive enough for any one of you survivors of the original Last Man Club. Unfortunately, that view doesn't take your ages into account. None of you really needs that much money enough to plan and execute a series of murders — one of them hundreds of miles away from your home — to get it. I needed a stronger motive.

"For a while, I thought I had it in the person of an underworld figure. He said he had a big bet on who survived, but he did convince me he hadn't done the killings himself. For one thing it wouldn't be his style to make murder look like accidents.

"I had to find someone else — not one of you survivors and linked to the hoodlum — who had a motive. I found such a person."

"Who was that?" Sam Browning asked. "Who wants me dead that I don't know about?"

"I'll tell you in a moment," Mike Shayne said. "Remember — figuring out who it could be isn't legal proof of anything. I had to wait for my suspect to tip his hand and do it in a way that would prove

who it was. Tonight he did that.

"He got into the storeroom over there and set a fire that wouldn't burn through the wall into the house till late at night. He had to have a key to do that. He locked two of you into the room.

"He pulled the light switch and waited for me on the stair. If he could have knocked me out there, I'd have burned to death, too, and he'd have pulled off the trick. He didn't knock me out."

Sam Spicer snorted. "I suppose you'll say your gambler sent in a man or men from his gang to do all this."

"No," Mike Shayne said. "He didn't have to. He had his man in the house. The same man who had borrowed a fortune from him a couple of years back at loanshark rates and needed the three million to pay it back. The man who had keys to all the rooms. The man who could rescue his uncles, who would inherit the three million. After that, Sam, you could arrange another 'accident' — inherit from your uncles — and pay off Manny the Boss."

Sam Spicer had a gun in his pocket and tried to get it out. But Mike Shayne had him pinned in an iron grasp in an instant.

The police were called in from the fire to take the desperate young man away.

In the Next Issue and Exclusively Yours —

A PATTERN FOR TERROR

The New Complete MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Low Hills Towers is the most opulent new luxury resort in the Miami area. So how did the severed human ear end up in Pat McGuinness' desk drawer? And what has become of Pat McGuinness? These are but two of the mysteries Mike Shayne must solve with a killer at his back!

He's Not Listening

Joe wanted a lift home after a year on the road. Noel was driving home after a long flight from himself. A storm brought them together where death awaited them.

by BOB LAWRENCE

OCCASIONAL THUNDER from charged rain clouds high above the viaduct kept Joe from drifting into a deep sleep. With each successive boom he would awaken and strain his eyes in the midnight as he looked down the deserted interstate. There were no headlights, nothing coming. It had been that way for several hours.

The young hitchhiker shifted positions on the hard pavement, rested his back against the steel guard rail and closed his eyes. The warm breeze, rustling the nearby fields of Iowa cornstalk, grew cooler as rain began to fall. Joe pulled his sleeping bag around his bare shoulders and felt warm and secure under his concrete tent.

A dozen miles from Joe's cozy viaduct, another young man was stepping from his sports car into the bright fluorescent lights of Truck World. Noel Sheen was handsomely dressed, contrasting sharply with the jean and tee-shirted long-haulers milling around in small bunches alongside their semis. His manner was brisk and businesslike, there was a haughty firmness in his voice.

"Fill it," he demanded as the attendant approached the gas pump.

Inside the crowded restaurant, a

not-too-attractive waitress filled a styrofoam cup with coffee for her new customer. From behind the bun warmer, she admired the man's good looks, thinking about her last blond lover.

"Here you go," she said, popping a plastic lid on the cup.

"Just a minute," Noel said coldly. "I told you three-quarters of a cup and no lid." The waitress looked up, surprised by the unexpected rudeness. Several burly truckers sitting at the counter turned and glared at the impolite stranger but said nothing.

As Noel left through the double-glass doors and approached the waiting attendant, the waitress sneered. "Creep."

"That'll be nine-twenty," the attendant said. Noel handed the man a ten and waited by the gas pump for his change. "Here you are, sir. Nine-twenty and eighty makes ten." Noel recounted the silver and dropped it in his pocket without comment.

"Say, you planning to go north tonight?" the attendant asked.

"Yep, what's it to you?" Noel replied bluntly.

"Don't mean nothing to me," the attendant said in a challenging tone. "Just thought you ought to know there's a big rainstorm building up. Ain't no trucks moving north tonight."

"Well, I ain't no truck!" Noel shot back as he sank into his Porsche and slammed the door.

"Hope you drown!" the attendant shouted as the blue sports car peeled away. Hot coffee spilled spilled over the lip of the styrofoam cup, burning Noel's hand as he shifted gears going up the interstate ramp. He violently cursed the waitress and hurled the cup out the window.

Lightning etched fingerlike patterns in the northern sky and lit the night like a pulsating strobe. Noel turned the wipers on and switched to bright lights as the Porsche raced up the interstate into increasing heavy rainfall. Static soon overcrowded the soft music on the radio and after zipping up and down the dial, he flicked it off in disgust.

The wiper blades seemed to strain to keep up with the stormy deluge which soon held the sports car to a crawling pace. Noel hugged the wheel and squinted his eyes as he tried to follow the faint path his headlights chopped out in the downpour.

Slowly, the Porsche approached the quiet viaduct where Joe was dozing. He had finally adjusted to the thunderous interruptions of the storm and was now captured in the world of dreams. All events seemed real at the moment. It was a pleasant dream and one that Joe experienced many times even in waking hours.

After a year's traveling, he had reached St. Paul where he was warmly welcomed by his tearful parents. For the first time in months, he ate his first home-cooked meal and drank beer with his father. The joy in their faces erased any need to apologize for running away last year. The past was forgotten. Mom and Dad were glad their son had returned home.

As the sleek sports car broke through the rain barrier into the dry habitat of the viaduct, Joe awoke suddenly, startled by the unexpected intrusion. Quickly, he sprang to his feet, lurching forward, his eyes momentarily blinded by the oncoming headlights. The car struck his left knee, sending him in a spin against the

guard rail.

"*Jeezus!*" Noel yelled in reaction to the sudden thud coming from the right side of his car. He pressed hard on his brakes. The Porsche skidded from the viaduct into the rain and squealed to a stop on the centerline.

Using the guard rail as a lever, Joe pushed with his hands and struggled to his feet. He was dazed, temporarily shocked. His knee throbbed but there was no pain.

"You trying to kill me?" Joe shouted in the darkness. Tires screeched and a low set of tail lights backed swiftly toward him. The car brought a cool spray of rain over his face as it moved under the cement umbrella. Leaving the engine idling, Noel bounded out, flashing a light in the hitchhiker's eyes.

"You idiot, what the blazes you doing in the middle of the road?" he yelled.

"*Me?* It was *you* running off the pavement!" Joe shouted, rubbing his knee. Noel whirled his flashlight from Joe's face and followed the beam around the back of his car to the right side.

"Better not be one scratch, not one dent!" he said angrily.

"*Dents!*" Joe said, his voice rising with resentment. "You could have *killed* me!"

Noel turned quickly, shining the light on Joe's face. "That's exactly what I'm gonna do if you don't keep your mouth shut."

Joe said nothing more and Noel turned back to his car. Slowly he examined the exterior, rubbing the tips of his fingers along the body from front to rear.

"Lucky for you," Noel said after a few minutes had passed. "She's clean," he said, rising and turning the flashlight on Joe. "Now you best keep your butt off the road, punk."

"And you best learn how to drive," Joe said heatedly.

"Shove it," Noel said, opening the car door. Joe was about to counter the remark but stopped short when realization struck.

"Hey, wait up," he shouted. "What about a ride?"

"I don't pick up hitchhikers."

"Come on, man," Joe pleaded, grabbing Noel's shirt sleeve. Noel seized the boy's wrist and twisted it until Joe went to his knees.

"Keep your filthy hands off me or I'll bash your head in."

"But I've been out here all night," Joe grimaced with pain.

"Well ain't that too bad!" Noel said as he pushed Joe to the pavement and sank into his Porsche, slamming the door.

Joe scrambled to his feet, cursing. Noel accelerated the big Porsche engine, shifted into first and popped the clutch. The car lunged forward with a short squealing of tires and stopped suddenly as the engine died. He turned the ignition switch, the engine kicked over rapidly but

failed to start. Again and again he repeated the exercise, cursing each failure.

Joe moved back to the guard rail and laughed at the man's dilemma. When the starter mustered nothing more than a final, faint squeal, Noel stepped out and slammed the door.

"Piece of junk!" he shouted, kicking the rear tire. "And it's all your fault, scum." He flashed his light on Joe.

"Who you calling scum?"

"*You*, that's who. You see anyone else around?"

Joe wanted to jump up and attack the man, but good sense and the sheer size of the stranger made it easy to back down.

"Now on your feet," Noel ordered. "Help me get this thing off the road."

"Why should I?" Joe replied without moving. Noel walked quickly toward the guard rail and brought his flashlight down within an inch of Joe's nose.

"Because I'm telling you to, that's why!" Noel shouted. "And I won't tell you a second time." Joe got the message and meekly obeyed.

With the Porsche safely on the shoulder beneath the viaduct, Noel got inside without a word to his helper. Joe stood silent for several minutes before gathering up enough courage to speak to the hostile driver. He rapped lightly on the windshield.

"Mind if I have a seat? It's getting awfully wet out here."

Noel sat up abruptly and flicked his flashlight on.

"Look at you, scum. When's the last time you had a bath? Get away from my car before I kick your teeth in." Joe retreated to his spot against the guard rail, thinking how he could equalize the situation if he just had a tire iron.

As the night wore on, increasing wind brought the storm further into the dry environs of the viaduct. Joe had crawled inside his sleeping bag, but it was no refuge from the howling downpour. The rain seeped through to his jeans.

He began to shiver. His teeth chattered in the cold night air. He thought about the dry warmth of the Porsche sitting in the darkness nearby. It would be worth another confrontation with his haughty enemy if he could get inside.

"Hey, it's raining like crazy out here," Joe yelled as he rapped on the windshield. "Give me a break, will you?"

Noel darted up, hitting his chest hard against the steering wheel. A half-empty bottle of whiskey fell from his lap and rolled on the floor. He flicked his flashlight on and shined it through the windshield at the hulking figure.

"*Get away from my car, trash!*" Noel yelled, slumping back in the seat.

"Let me in — *please!*" Joe persisted. "I'm freezing to death." Noel popped open the door and lunged at Joe in a dive

over the sloping hood of the Porsche.

"I've told you enough, you low-life punk." Joe raised his arms in defense as Noel attacked with fist and flashlight. In less than a moment, it was all over. Joe fell hard to the pavement in front of the car and could do nothing to ward off the crushing kicks that followed.

"Looks like you got the message this time," Noel growled as he returned to the comfort of his car. With a quick gulp, he polished off the whiskey and hurled the bottle out the window. Sleep followed as he waited for daylight, a break in the weather and help from Truck World.

THE SUDDEN BLARING horn of a fast moving emi reverberating off the viaduct walls woke Noel just before dawn. The gray cast of early morning filtered through the rain-shrouded windows of the Porsche, where the young man sat yawning and rubbing the sands of sleep from his eyes.

There was another attempt at starting his engine, and another before he stepped out into the cold fog. The storm had subsided, but the sky remained fully clothed in low-hanging clouds giving off a misty rain. Noel closed the door, stretched his long arms and yawned again. His legs and back ached from the short but uncomfortable nap in the car.

A few deep knee bends might help, he thought. Down on "one," up on "two," he began. Then, suddenly, midway between the counts, he stopped. His eyes were fixed on two bare feet protruding out below the front bumper.

"What the devil!" he shouted as he wheeled around the edge of the car. "I told you to stay away . . ."

Noel gagged, horrified by what he saw lying at his feet. His first impulse was to run, to scream, but he was paralyzed. Joe's eyes were narrowly opened and glazed over, his mouth was wide open, exposing his teeth, blood was wet on his forehead. Noel stood there, unable to move, staring at the dead boy, faintly remembering the brief struggle with the hitchhiker.

To Noel, the grotesque features on the face below looked all too familiar. Brad Story had had that same look after the accident last fall. Noel had claimed that Brad was driving when his car crashed, killing his close friend. However, evidence gathered by the Highway Patrol had proved otherwise.

For months after the accident, Noel suffered the trauma of one caught up in a vicious lie. His adamant persistence of innocence during the long manslaughter trial had failed to convince the jury, but Noel himself came to accept the falsehood in his own mind.

"It was Brad — he killed himself," Noel repeated over and over until he was thoroughly assured. The fact that the wealth and in-

fluence of his family kept him out of prison added reinforcement to his pretentions. Still, though he had beaten the rap, Noel soon became a tormented soul, forever haunted by the truth that lurked within his subconscious mind.

In the months following Brad Story's death, he developed a violent, sometimes schizophrenic personality. A new car and a long vacation in the southland did little to alleviate the torture. And now, on the trip home, he was once again faced with violent death caused by his hands.

He might have stood there numbly gazing at the dead boy's body forever, had it not been for the shot-like noise of a car whizzing through the viaduct in the south lane. Startled, he turned quickly, watching the car disappear in the fog and misty rain.

"Gotta get outta here," he said, hurriedly getting into his car. "Come on, *start!*" he yelled as he frantically turned the key without results. He slammed his fist against the steering wheel and cursed his failed Porsche.

For several minutes, Noel sat in silence, agonizingly sorting through possible solutions to his dilemma. Something had to be done about the dead body lying under his front bumper. He knew that his next move would be crucial and self-protection must be the cornerstone of any decision.

A confession of murder in self defense was quickly ruled out. The risk of losing a court battle was too great. Finally, he bounded out of the car. "I'll ditch him over there," he said, looking at a clump of tall weeds just beyond the northern edge of the viaduct.

Cautiously, looking in both directions for signs of traffic in the dense fog, Noel approached the body. Kneeling, he took hold of the boy's lifeless arms but dropped them quickly. He shook his hands wildly, trying to exorcise the cold clamminess he had touched. He began to tremble, his stomach turned in knots and whirled with nausea.

Daylight was approaching fast and Noel knew that he must hurry with the gruesome task. But just as he managed the nerve to continue the disposal, the distant noise of a fast moving vehicle sent him into a panic. Hurriedly, he shoved the body under the front bumper until it touched the tires and would go no further.

Down the interstate, Noel saw the faint outline of a pickup truck moving ghost-like through the misty fog. He stood up slowly, bracing himself with hands on the hood. "Don't stop," he prayed outloud. He cringed as he watched the pickup draw near then suddenly pull to the shoulder of the road a few feet behind the Porsche. A coveralled man leaned a bald head out the window and hollered.

"Need some help, young fella?"

"No, no problem," Noel re-

plied nervously. "Just stretching my legs."

"Okay," the man said, waving his arm in a friendly gesture. Noel waved back and forced a smile as the pickup drove slowly past.

"Don't see it," he muttered, trying to kick the body still further under the car. He turned and watched, breathing a sigh of relief as the truck disappeared in the clouds of fog.

"Better hurry and stash this guy," Noel said, crouching below the hood. Overcoming his earlier anxiety, he began pulling Joe's body from underneath the car. "Wait a minute." He stopped suddenly. "This won't work. I'll be connected. They'll come to fix my car and remember me when they find the body."

Within the hour, Noel had hitched a ride to Truck World and returned to the viaduct in a service van. "Nice rig you got here," the mechanic said as he studied the engine.

"Yeah, great. Just fix it, will you," Noel said, nervously pacing alongside his Porsche.

"Well, you ain't getting no juice. The battery's dead."

"I already told you that. Now just get it going," Noel said, his voice rising in anger.

"Even if you had juice, she wouldn't run. Distributor's full of water."

"Terrific, so what now?"

"We tow her in and charge the battery," the mechanic said, closing the hood. "You know, this here's a real beauty."

"Yeah, yeah — let's go."

"Always wanted to own a car like this." The mechanic bent down below the trunk and looked at the rear springs. "She always sit this low in the back? You must have her loaded." Noel felt sweat dripping from his armpits, his stomach tightened as he watched the curious mechanic examine the springs.

Inside the garage at Truck World, Noel leaned against the trunk of his Porsche during the one-hour quick charge. "Why not go in and get yourself some coffee," the mechanic insisted several times. Overcome by paranoia, Noel refused and continued to guard against any encroachment by the seemingly suspicious mechanic.

"Say, you feel okay?" the mechanic asked. "You seem awful nervous about something."

"I'm fine. Just in a hurry."

"You sure?"

"Yes," Noel almost shouted. "Now will you get off my back and check my battery."

The misty fog of dawn soon gave way to clearing skies of midmorning and, as Noel drove northward, the sun began to shine. But the favorable change in the weather did nothing to cheer him. Horrid, mind-recorded photographs of Joe's face flashed repeatedly before his eyes.

As the blue Porsche moved

speedily up the interstate, the familiar viaduct ahead looked ominous and threatening. Noel felt a chill sweeping up his spine, sending a cold tingle throughout his body as he drove through.

He pressed the accelerator firmly, trying to put miles between himself and the viaduct, hoping that somehow he could outdistance the body in his trunk. He planned to take the first exit off the interstate, but the adjoining blacktops stretched through flat soybean fields for as far as he could see.

"*Jeezus!*" he said, slamming his fist against the steering wheel.

The miles between exits were long, and each one offered more of the same — acres of bean fields and no place to hide the body. So intent was Noel's search that a Highway Patrol car, its blue and red lights flashing, was only several links behind before he saw it in his rearview mirror.

"Oh, *God!*" he half-screamed in panic. "That mechanic, he nailed me. I knew he was suspicious." Noel's eyes began to twitch uncontrollably as he glanced repeatedly from the road to the mirror. "Should I make a run for it?" he questioned in a whisper.

But, as suddenly as it had appeared, the Patrol car shot around the Porsche and speedily contracted to a small dot far up the interstate.

"*Wow!*" Noel said as he wiped the sweat from his brow with his shirt sleeve. "Gotta do something fast. May not be so lucky next time."

"It's eight fifty-five," the radio announced with a break in the music. "Time now for headline news." Noel reached over to punch up another station but hesitated as the lead story began. "Those two convicts who escaped from the State Penitentiary last night are still at large. Both serving life for murder, they broke out after killing a prison guard. The early morning rainstorm has hampered lawmen trying to track down the convicts. In other South Dakota news . . ."

Noel switched the radio off, glanced at the trunk momentarily and thought out loud, "Could it be? The guy I killed is one of them. Maybe — maybe I'm off the hook."

Several minutes passed as he conjured up false hopes of ending his dilemma, but soon realization stepped in and ruined his scenario. The hitchhiker in his trunk was just a kid, a fat weakling, definitely not an escaped murderer.

"But wait a second," Noel continued to scheme, "when they find his body, maybe the cons will get the rap."

"Stoney State Park, Exit One Mile." Noel gleefully read the road sign. "That's the place. Should be lots of spots to dump him there."

The park was woodsy, landscaped in Kentucky blue grass with ash and elm trees and occasional junipers. Noel drove deep into the rain-glistened forest, searching for a side road, unaware that he was being followed by a Park Ranger. He had just spotted a suitable break from the blacktop when a blast from the Ranger's horn shattered his prospects and his nerves.

The scene in the rearview mirror — a green pickup truck, a hatless silver-haired Ranger, gold badge and epaulets gleaming — sent shock waves through his body. Noel was stunned speechless, momentarily immobilized. His twitching eyes watched as the Ranger cautiously walked toward his car with a shotgun cradled in his arms.

"STEP OUT OF the car, please," the Ranger spoke with polite authority. Noel, trembling and silent, struggled out, his mind racing with a multitude of thoughts. The Ranger stepped back several paces, keeping Noel at gun's length.

"Let's see your license."

Noel fumbled through his billfold and produced a plastic driver's permit. His hands shook violently as he thrust it toward the Ranger.

"Noel Sheen, Sioux Falls," he read from the license. "This your present address, Mr. Sheen?"

"Yes, what's the trouble?"

The Ranger glanced up with a look of astonishment on his face. "You don't *know?*"

Noel felt the blood pump through his heart. Sweat trickled down his sides, a lump pulsed in his throat. He tried to speak, to make some response, but his voice gagged in mumbles.

"Let's see your registration," the Ranger said as he walked to the rear of the car and looked down at the license plate. Noel searched frantically through his billfold and handed the Ranger a crumpled piece of paper.

"Well, reckon there's no use delaying you any longer," the Ranger said, glancing up.

"Huh — *what?*" Noel gasped.

"What you got here?" the Ranger asked, tapping on the trunk lid.

"*Oh, God! He knows,*" Noel thought.

"Seem to be carrying quite a load."

"Luggage — it's luggage," Noel said abruptly. "Been on a

long trip."

"Uh-huh, and you stopped at Truck World along the way," the Ranger said.

"How did you . . . ?" Noel was startled.

"Don't take no detective to figure that out."

Noel closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. *Why is he playing this game?* he thought. *Why doesn't he just arrest me and get it over with?*

"Just step back here," the Ranger said. "It's as plain as day." Noel, on the verge of fainting, walked numbly to the rear of the Porsche, expecting to see blood trickling from the trunk.

"See, it's right there," the Ranger said, pointing at the bumper. "They pasted one of their stickers on ya." The Ranger began to chuckle, not noticing the look of exasperation on Noel's face.

"Tell me something," the Ranger continued. "Why did you pick the park?"

"The park?"

"That's right, why here?"

"It, I . . ." Noel began to stutter as his mind swirled near the breaking point. *The tension is too great*, he thought. *Either he ends this charade or I do.*

"It was an accident," he blurted, "I didn't mean to —"

"No use to get upset," the Ranger interrupted. "Lots of people take the wrong turn and drive in here by mistake."

"Huh?" Noel was baffled.

"We just like to know why folks stop in the park," the Ranger said. "It's an item for our public relations file, that's all."

"Oh!" Noel fought to regain composure. "I was just looking for a place to get some coffee."

"Looks like you could use it," the Ranger said, handing Noel back his license and registration. "No coffee here, though. But there's a restaurant up the road from here."

"Thanks."

"Sorry about coming on so strong, son. Got a couple of convicts on the loose, so we can't be too careful."

"Yeah, I heard about that. They supposed to be around here?"

"Sheriff seems to think so. The search is being narrowed down this way."

"Hope you get them," Noel said, opening his car door. The Ranger walked back to his pickup and eased his shotgun onto a wooden rack next to the rear window. He paused before entering the cab.

"Hey, Mr. Sheen," he said. "Just follow me."

"Now what?" Noel muttered under his breath.

"Follow me on up to the cafe. I could go for a cup myself."

Reluctantly, Noel followed the Ranger's truck from the tree-shaded blacktop into the bright sunlight outside the park. As he drove, he hoped desperately for a miracle, wishing the green pickup

would vanish before they reached the restaurant. He hated the park official for unwittingly rattling his nerves and pushing him perilously close to a needless confession.

And how, with his plans for disposing the body thwarted, he felt coerced into playing out the drama in another scene with the Ranger. Instinct told him to veer off course, unload his unwanted cargo and hit the interstate.

But to shake loose from the Ranger might arouse his suspicions. It would be a fatal mistake, Noel decided. He drove on, cursing the Ranger and the turn of events which had brought him so very near the brink of destruction.

After several miles of dusty gravel roads, they wheeled into a small cafe just off the interstate. Noel slowed, waiting as the Ranger parked in front. He then pulled alongside the building, putting as much distance as possible between the Porsche and the pickup.

"Thanks a lot," Noel said to the Ranger, who had taken a seat at the counter.

"Have a sit down, son."

"No thanks," Noel said. "Just getting coffee to go. Want to make it to Sioux Falls by noon."

"Oh come *on*," the Ranger insisted. "You got the rest of your life to get home."

"Okay, but only for a minute. Got to get moving."

For what seemed to Noel like an eternity, he sipped coffee and half-heartedly engaged in trivial conversation with his unwanted companion.

While the Ranger rambled on about hard times during the depression, his thoughts centered on the body in his trunk and how to get rid of it. When the Ranger raised his voice in emphasizing a point, Noel would nod mechanically with a look of detachment on his face.

He breathed a noticeable sigh of relief when the Ranger failed to insist that he have "just one more refill," and allowed him to leave without further encroachment. With a wave of goodbye, he hurried out the door, grumbling obscenities along the way.

"*My car!*" Noel almost screamed as he rounded the corner of the cafe. He scanned the parking lot quickly, walking to the rear of the building and back to the spot where he had parked. Only semis and sedans dotted the slick tarmac. The Porsche was nowhere in sight. The Ranger was pulling out of the lot when he noticed the bewildered Noel through his rearview mirror. He backed up sharply and rolled down his window.

"Got troubles, son?"

"Yeah, my car's been . . ." Noel stopped short, realizing it was best not to involve anyone, especially not this man. If it's been stolen, he thought, it's crucial that the car not be found.

"Lose your wheels?" the Ranger asked, looking around the

parking lot.

"I — it . . ." Noel stuttered.

"This where you left it?"

"Yeah, but . . ."

"Looks like she's been stolen!" the Ranger said. "I don't know for sure, but I betcha it was those convicts. I'll get on the horn here and alert the sheriff."

"Oh, *no!*" Noel said to himself. "*Don't!*"

"We'll get her back, don't worry. You just hang tight and we'll get back to you."

Noel watched as the Ranger reported his stolen car on his radio and drove away. "Don't find it," he whispered. "*Let it go!*"

Noel turned slowly and walked toward the cafe, mesmerized by the rush of events since the murder under the viaduct. Inside, he sank into one of the multi-colored booths and ordered a breakfast he couldn't eat.

Fatigued and haggard from the ordeal, he tried to sleep, but each time he closed his eyes he was haunted by a nightmarish collage. His mind whirled with scenes from the murder as the dead boy's face pulsated in a periphery of blood.

At one point, he screamed out loud, startling the sparse crowd of truckers and tourists in the cafe. He buried his face in his hands as heads turned in amazement.

"What's his problem?" a busboy whispered to the waitress.

"Somebody stole his car," she answered.

"I'd be screaming, too," the busboy said as he rolled his dish-cart toward the kitchen.

Like a man sealed in a capsule, Noel drifted quietly into a world of isolation, oblivious of those around him. Eyes wide, with a look of detachment on his face, he sat without stirring from morning until mid-afternoon. It took the sudden grip of a lawman's hand to jolt him back into reality.

"Mr. Sheen?" a blue-shirted Deputy asked, shaking Noel's shoulder.

"*Huh?*" Noel said with a start.

"Got your car back," the Deputy said firmly. "Found it abandoned on a back road some twenty miles from here."

Noel paled and began to tremble as the Deputy continued, "seems they had a flat and just left it."

"They?" Noel managed.

"Yeah, those two escaped convicts. But we got them, too," the Deputy said, sitting down across from Noel. "It's funny, though. They didn't know a thing about that body."

"Body?" Noel twisted his face to produce an expression of surprise.

"The dead kid in your trunk," the Deputy said, leaning over the table with a piercing look in his eyes. "Now you'd know all about that, wouldn't you?"

"No, I . . ." Noel stammered.

"Said they'd seen it for the first time when they looked for the spare tire."

"It wasn't — I didn't —"

"Likely story," the Deputy interrupted. "But we —"

"*Stop* it!" Noel half-screamed, bringing his trembling hands over his face. "It was an —"

"But we didn't buy that for one minute," the Deputy continued, ignoring the outburst. "Sheriff, he figures they killed this guy for his money. Probably a hitchhiker or something."

Noel sank back against the booth, mumbling incoherently as the Deputy related the capture of the convicts. He was off the hook, saved by a bizarre twist of fate. He felt like shouting for joy, but the moment called for quiet restraint.

"Now you just sit tight," the Deputy said, getting up from the table. "One of our men is changing the flat and should bring your car over real soon."

"Uh — thanks," Noel said, his face breaking into a smile.

"Oh, one other thing," the Deputy turned as he was leaving.

"Huh?"

"From now on, take your keys out of the ignition when you park."

"Sure, it won't happen again," Noel said, thinking how his mistake had paid off.

For Noel Sheen, the scant passing of time since Joe's death was traumatic. The elation he had felt after being saved from the clutches of the law vanished quickly. Two escaped convicts may have been fingered for his crime, but he lived with the memory.

Alone, secluded in his spacious lakeside cottage, Noel was constantly tormented. His mind's eye never closed on an ever present collage of horrid scenes depicting his act of murder. From dawn to dusk, he relived a nightmare, leaving him sleepless and driving him into fits of rage and shrilling screams.

But while Noel was being consciously plagued by Joe's murder, his subconscious was resurrecting another of his morbid acts. The events surrounding the death of Brad Story were soon meshed into the whirling, haunting collage. A sleeping lie had finally surfaced.

Now, for the first time since fabricating his innocence, Noel anguished in the awful truth. Joe and Brad, their morose faces in death, shot continually through his mind in agonizing volleys.

Living in constant torture, unable to sleep or eat, he wasted away in body and spirit. For him, the transparent veil separating sanity and insanity became tenuous and thin. Reality was fast slipping away.

The two visitors had rung the doorbell, knocked several times and peeked in the windows before finally letting themselves in through the unlocked front door. Noel, unshaven and clad in a dingy, yellow bathrobe, didn't stir as the men approached the sofa; his face held a tight frown, his eyes were fixed on a floor lamp across the cluttered room.

"Noel Sheen?" the taller man asked. There was no response.

"Mr. Sheen," the man continued, "I'm John Amery, this is Elroy Sims — Detectives with the County Sheriff's Office." Noel's eyes held in the direction of the lamp, his body was rigid, seemingly lifeless. The detectives looked at each other in amazement and shook their heads.

"Mr. Sheen," Amery went on, "there's been an autopsy on that body they found in your trunk last week. Seems he'd been dead some ten hours before your car was stolen. We think . . ."

"Forget it, John," Sims interrupted. "He's not listening."

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BRIEF CASE

Kane's job was to turn over the money and bring the girl home. But things didn't work as planned.

by

CHARLES HINMAN

IT WAS 2 A.M. The man in the shadowed doorway looked at his watch. He moved his arm in such a casual manner that it was a full second before I realized he was also holding a gun.

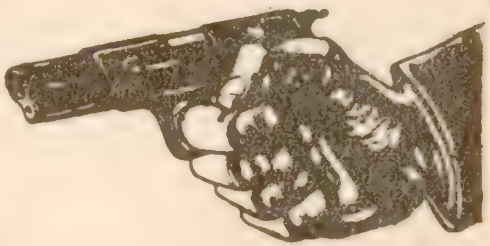
"You're right on time," he said.

"Yes," I replied. "And you're armed. That wasn't part of the deal."

"It is now. Spread your legs and stand still, please."

He searched me with casual expertise. When he patted the lump of the ballpoint pen in my inside coat pocket, he laughed. "What are you going to do, take notes?" he asked. Then he straightened up and put the gun in his raincoat pocket. He smiled.

"Fine," he said. "Clean as the month of May. Now we can proceed. Walk with me to the corner, where we take a subway." He pointed at the briefcase I was holding. "And I'll take that, of course."



"But —" I began.

"I know," he interrupted. "It has a combination lock. You are the only one who knows the combination. It also contains a bomb. If the tumblers aren't meshed when the lid opens, the bomb explodes, killing me and destroying all the lovely green money inside. I'm well aware of all that. But still, I'd like to hold it."

I handed it over and we walked to the subway.

The Broadway-Lafayette station was deserted at that early hour. But standing on the platform I felt none of the fear that usually plagues lonely travelers under the streets of New York City.

All the danger I needed was right next to me with a gun in his coat, carrying the briefcase that held fifty thousand dollars of John Howard Masterson's money. Fifty grand was the price for the safe return of Masterson's kidnapped daughter Mimi. I was supposed to be Masterson's personal secretary, come to buy her back.

The man next to me was stocky and well-built, with short sandy hair covering what was probably a very thick skull. There were vague circles under his blue eyes and his nose was slightly bent and puffy. He looked like an athlete gone to seed.

But he moved with deliberate assurance and I wasn't about to underestimate his capacity for violence. And there was Mimi to consider. If Masterson loved anything more than money, it was his beautiful wayward daughter. He had to have her back. I was, I reflected, on a very delicate mission.

The Brooklyn-bound F train rumbled into the station and screeched to a halt. The blond man motioned me into an empty car and we sat down. As the train clattered through its tunnel he sat staring at the opposite windows which showed nothing of the outside but gave an excellent view of the car's interior. He held the briefcase carefully on his knees.

At the Jay St.-Boro Hall stop in Brooklyn the car doors opened and stayed open. Across the platform, the Manhattan-bound A train rolled in. Its doors opened. A few passengers transferred.

The blond man said, "Get up and stand with me at the door. When I move, so do you."

We stood by the opening. The man waited with his gun arm around my elbow. Time stopped. The two trains rested, creaking and hissing like ancient snakes. Suddenly I was pushed out the door and hustled across the platform into the maw of the A train. Its doors immediately shut and the car lurched forward. I collapsed on a bench as the blond man surveyed the receding platform.

"No one followed us," he said. "I expected as much, but you can't be too sure."

He came over and sat beside me. He put the briefcase on the floor, upright between his legs.

"Who are you?" he asked. "You don't look like police, you don't look like FBI."

"My name is Harry Kane," I said. "I am Mr. Masterson's personal secretary. We are handling this affair privately, as you requested. Besides, Mr. Masterson dislikes publicity and he loathes the police."

The blond man laughed. "My sentiments exactly, Harry," he said. "But then, I guess all crooks think alike. Of course I'm not in Masterson's league. I don't understand respectable crime. Just give me a gun and a target and I do fine."

We rode uptown as far as Canal St. There we got off and the blond man led me upstairs and out along Canal until we turned a corner and went down a side alley, to a dusty old Jeep with New Jersey plates. The blond man opened the driver-side door and placed the briefcase gingerly on the rear seat. He then walked around to the passenger door and opened it.

He helped me inside, then walked back around front and climbed behind the wheel. He started the motor, which coughed and sputtered before catching, then he reached over to the glove compartment and pulled out a pint of whiskey. He uncapped it, took a long pull, then handed it to me. I refused.

"Look, Harry," he said. "Take my word for it. We have a long drive ahead of us. There's no point in not being sociable. You won't see the girl before daylight, so relax. Why don't you loosen your tie? I'm beginning to think you're a very boring person."

"Yes, perhaps I am," I said. "But I am merely an intermediary in this affair. You are interested in money; Mr. Masterson is interested in his daughter. It is up to me to see that you are both satisfied. I consider that a very grave responsibility."

"Suit yourself," he said and gunned the motor.

We entered Canal St. and slipped into the Holland Tunnel. On the other side of the Hudson we followed routes 1 and 9 over the Pulaski Skyway. The industrial wasteland of New Jersey festered quietly below us. The blond man hummed softly to himself, took another gulp of whiskey, and then fiddled with the radio.

Amid all the static he found a station, weak but audible, from Wheeling, West Virginia. It played twangy country music. After a time, my eyelids began to droop. The music continued. A quavering female voice issued from the radio speaker, singing something about shotguns and the Lord. The blond man hummed along. My eyes closed.

When they opened again it was morning. I was alone in the Jeep. It had stopped moving and was parked by a crumbling wooden garage on a weed-choked sand lot off a narrow sand road that seemed to run for miles in either direction. The countryside was flat and on it, as far as the eye could see, grew nothing but pine trees. But they were pine trees of a curious dimension. Not one looked more than four feet high. These miniature trees stretched endlessly on a bed of sand and weeds.

Nothing disturbed this monotonous vista, except that, about fifty yards diagonally to the right of the Jeep, at the end of a crooked path, was a ramshackle cabin of plank boards with no windows, a tin door and a tar-paper roof. As I looked at the door it opened and the blond man stepped out, still wearing his raincoat, and holding the gun in his hand. He walked toward the Jeep and me.

I struggled to get out of the Jeep and face him, standing on two feet. He saw me and laughed loudly, raised his arm, pointed the gun at the garage, and fired. The sound cracked the air and a few boards fell to the ground. The blond man laughed again.

"Well now, Harry," he said. "I bet you wonder just where the hell you are now, don't you?"

I told him I did. "Either I've been asleep for two days," I said, "or you've discovered a shortcut to Mississippi."

The man laughed once again. "That's good — I like that," he said. "Mississippi. Might as well be the moon." He stood next to me and squeezed off another round at the garage. More boards fell and an old paint can fell over on the sand. My ears hurt.

The man stopped laughing. "We're still in New Jersey," he said. "They call this place the Pine Barrens. I read once that if you built a big enough bonfire out here, on a clear night you could watch it burn from the top of the Empire State Building."

"That's very interesting," I said. "I'll have to try it sometime. But not right now. You'll recall, we have some business to transact. I give you some money and you give me a girl."

The blond man shrugged. "You are boring," he said. "We happen to be in a very historical area. Do you realize that some of these sand roads around here are unchanged, I mean *totally* unchanged since before the Revolutionary War? And a lot of the people here, they have no driver's licenses, they aren't registered to vote, none of that crap.

"I mean, they're on nobody's *list!* But they survive. It's like the old days." The man shrugged again. "Oh what do you care," he said. "Business, that's all. Okay, in the cabin. After you." He poked me with the barrel of his gun.

Mimi Masterson lay on a folding cot against one wall of the stifling empty room. She was covered with an old quilt that was tucked in all around her so that only her head showed. Her jet-black hair was rumpled and sweat beaded her smooth forehead, but I had no trouble recognizing her face as the one that John Howard Masterson had plastered all over the walls of his Park Avenue study.

A blue bandana stuffed in her mouth made her cheeks bulge and distorted her expression, but her eyes were unmistakable. They

were a deep emerald green, startlingly intense, and hinted at depths of experience known to only the most worldly of women. Mimi was just seventeen.

The blond man walked over to the cot and stripped off the quilt. Mimi was spreadeagled on her back, her ankles and wrists tied to the cot's metal frame. She was also naked. Her eyes blazed briefly at me, then she turned her face to the wall.

"You see?" the blond man said. "Not a mark on her." He replaced the quilt.

I walked over and looked down at the girl. "Did he touch you?" I asked. "Did he hurt you?" She slowly shook her head.

I turned to the blond man. "This was totally unnecessary," I said. "Mr. Masterson will be extremely displeased."

The man smirked. "Oh, he will now!" he said. "That's too bad. He should have worried about his poor daughter when he let her go live in the Village with all those fag artists and actors. I'm teaching him a lesson. He's lucky it was me that grabbed her, instead of some of the real sickies." He shrugged. "Besides," he went on, "I took her clothes just so she would think twice about trying to escape while I was gone."

I nodded. "Fine," I said. "Now untie her and let her get dressed and we'll conclude our transaction."

"Okay by me," he said. "You'll find her clothes in a paper bag in the old garage. Why don't you get them?"

I went out to the crumbling shack by the Jeep and found a paper bag half-buried in the sand. Inside, neatly folded, was a paint-spattered pair of blue jeans and a pink cotton blouse. There was also some underwear and a pair of faded white sneakers. I took these back to the cabin and gave them to Mimi, who was sitting, upright and ungagged, on the cot, wrapped in the quilt and massaging her wrists. She tried to smile.

I asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Oh, I — I'm all right, I guess. I just want to go home," she said in a weak voice.

"That's what I'm here for," I told her. Then I faced her kidnapper while she struggled to get dressed as modestly as possible under the circumstances.

I said, "This is what you types refer to as the payoff, I suppose."

"Right," he said. "Just tell me the combination, I open the briefcase and count the money. If it's all there, I'm satisfied and you both walk out of here free. If not . . ." He trailed off and let his silence convey his threat. He hefted the gun in his hand.

"Wait a minute," I said. "We walk out of here, but to where? I have no idea where we are and I doubt Mimi does. If we just walk out of here, we're lost."

The blond man chuckled.

"Exactly," he said. "Of course, I'll give you directions to the nearest town if things work out as planned. We're actually about ten miles from civilization, but there are so many sand roads around here that any stranger to these parts gets hopelessly lost in minutes. Happens quite often. That, naturally, is the reason I picked this place. Anything can happen here, and nobody will care. So, friend Harry, the combination please."

He walked over to the opposite side of the cabin. There on the floor, amid crumpled bags of take-out food, empty styrofoam cups and crushed cigaret butts, stood the briefcase. He picked it up and laid it at my feet.

"No," I said. "One more thing. Before I give you the combination, Mimi goes outside and stands behind the Jeep."

The blond man showed anger for the first time. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"It's simple," I said. "You have the briefcase with the money in your possession. You have me with the combination in your possession. And you have the girl. You have three aces.

"I have the fourth — the combination. Before I show it, I want assurance that you won't try to cheat and bring in a fifth ace — your gun. I want Mimi out of range before I give you the combination. That way, if you kill me, at least she has a chance."

The blond man shook his head. "You're crazy. She's my insurance. If the money isn't here and I let her out of my sight, I've got nothing."

"The money is here," I insisted. "And you've still got me. I care what happens to me, even if nobody else does. I guarantee you'll get your money, but I have to protect Mimi as well. That's the way it's got to be."

The man wrestled with my demand for a few seconds, then evidently decided to play it my way. "Okay," he said. "But make this fast. I'm getting nervous."

So was I. I waited until Mimi was outside and by the Jeep before I spoke again. "Turn the three dials on the briefcase to read 8-6-5 left to right. Then open the lid."

The blond man's fingers shook a little on the dials. He was anxious to get the money, but cautious about the bomb he thought was inside. He lifted the lid slowly. He didn't say anything for almost a minute after that. Then he whistled softly. "You lied" he said finally. "But not about the money. There's no bomb."

I said, "I convinced Mr. Masterson not to bother with it. I didn't want to risk carrying it around. Besides, if you thought there was a bomb, then our purpose was accomplished."

"Very clever," he said. He took almost ten minutes counting the stacks of bills inside the briefcase,

then he straightened up. He was smiling. "You've done a good job, Harry," he said. "The Old Man should realize how valuable you are. It's been a pleasure doing business with you."

"Likewise," I said. "Now how about telling me the way out of here."

"Sure," he said. "Take the road out past the garage for about two miles. You pass two side roads on the left, then one on the right. Take that one, about five miles. It twists a lot and at one point forks. Bear left at the fork. After a while you hit a paved road. You could try hitching, but there's never any traffic.

"Hang a left down that road and in about four miles you come across the little town of Chatsworth. There's a gas station and a diner, with a telephone. If you want the law, you'll have to call the State Police in Lebanon. But I'll be long gone by then."

"I shook my head. "Mr. Masterson was adamant on that point. No police."

The blond man stretched out his hand. "Then that's that," he said.

We shook hands, and I walked out to the Jeep and Mimi. He could then, I knew, shoot me in the back and try for the girl, but I doubted that he would. He didn't.

I took Mimi's hand and we started walking. We went about twenty-five yards down the road before I stopped and turned around. The blond man was standing in the doorway holding the briefcase and watching us. I waved. He began to wave back. Then I took out the heavy ballpoint pen from my inside coat pocket. It was actually a disguised radio transmitter.

I pressed the button on top that sent the signal that detonated the bomb planted in the false bottom of the briefcase the blond man was holding. The blast blew him sideways out through the door and left him a bloody heap on the sand. A split second later the shock wave washed over us.

I kept my eyes on the cabin. The doorway was a lot wider and there was a large hole in the roof. The Jeep seemed undamaged. Bits of flaming money hovered gently in the air before settling to the ground, like charred butterflies. The cabin began to burn.

I turned to Mimi. Her mouth was open and tears were rolling out of her amazing green eyes. She looked very sad.

"I wondered if you'd care," I said.

She blinked. "What?" she said weakly.

"I wondered if you'd care," I repeated, "when I blew up your friend. For some reason, I'm glad you do."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said in the same flat voice.

"You can stop acting now," I said. "Your friend was better at it than you are, anyway. I'll bet that's what he was, an actor, prob-

ably out of work and eager to keep in practice. So he went in on your little scheme. Also, the money was attractive. You knew your father would pay it, of course. Fifty grand to him is dust. And you knew he wouldn't call the police. But you were stupid to think that he'd ever let anyone get away with kidnapping his precious darling daughter."

Mimi put a hand to her face, like she was shielding her eyes from something bright. She didn't say anything, so I kept talking. I couldn't think of anything else to do just then."

"You made a lot of mistakes," I said. "Your friend the kidnapper was convinced as hell, but I couldn't figure him doing this alone. I pulled a sleeping act last night, hoping he'd get careless, but he didn't. This morning, though, it gave him time to get in the cabin and tie you up.

"You must have had that planned anyway. You'd already taken off your clothes and put them in the garage. Maybe he intended to blindfold me and keep me in the Jeep while he finished lashing you to the bed. Since he thought I was asleep, he didn't bother. Of course, he could have done all that before he went into the city last night, but I'm sure you wouldn't have stood for it, being tied up all night."

I looked back at the cabin. Flames were all over it, and a dark pillar of smoke was beginning to rise into the air. We would have to leave very soon. I took one of Mimi's hands. The other one still covered her face.

"It was the naked bit that convinced me you were faking a snatch," I continued. "You probably thought that was dramatic and would throw anyone off the track, but it didn't ring true. Grown-up male criminals don't tie up beautiful young girls with no clothes on and then leave them alone, if you know what I mean. And they don't fold pants and shirts as neatly as the ones I found in the bag. Obviously your touch.

"And the cigaret butts on the cabin floor. I didn't see the man smoke once. They had to be yours. But they were on the floor with the remains of a meal. Two people obviously sat around and ate, not like a kidnapper and his victim, but like two friends. Also, I saw a pack of cigarets in the glove compartment of the Jeep. Again, probably yours."

Mimi looked up suddenly. Her face was red with anger now, not sadness. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"My name is Harry Kane," I said. "I used to be a private detective. But that's not important."

"What do you mean, you *used* to be a private detective?" she asked.

"Just what I said. I lost my license. But never mind that. I

still work occasionally. Your father hired me to get you back."

She looked at the burning cabin. "And to do that?" she said.

"That was your father's idea. Just part of my job."

"You bastard!" she said. She pulled her hand away and swung it at my face, but I grabbed it before it connected. Then I hit her, not very hard, but harder than I wanted to. I cursed myself immediately.

"I'll make you a deal," I said. "You don't tell your father I slapped you, and I won't tell him that his daughter kidnapped herself. Now come on, we've got to get out of here."

I walked Mimi back to the Jeep and put her in the passenger seat. She didn't watch while I made the unpleasant search for the key. It was very hot near the cabin. I found the key in the pocket of the bloody raincoat, with the gun. I left the gun. The Jeep started easily this time.

Hours later, in the city, I returned Mimi to her grateful father and collected five thousand in cash. I left the Jeep on a bad street in Harlem. I took a cab downtown and had a lousy expensive dinner and quite a few too many drinks. Then I bought a ticket and took the elevator up to the observation deck of the Empire State Building.

It was a clear night. I spent a long time looking off to the southwest, but there was neither flicker nor glow on the dead dark horizon of New Jersey.

MIKE SHAYNE PRESENTS

Next Month's Headliners

A PATTERN FOR TERROR by BRETT HALLIDAY
The Mike Shayne Complete Short Novel

CONDITIONED TO KILL by J.F. PEIRCE
An exciting new Novelet

LITTLE GIRL LOST by JEAN DARLING

THE HUNCH PLAYER by R.G. HALLAWELL

The Hole in the Window

When Sergeant Moskowitz of the NYPD got his teeth into a case like the Lawrence Aker bond robbery, no one — not the Lieutenant, not the Captain, not the Commissioner, not the FBI, not even the CIA — could get him to quit it.

by GARY M. LEVINE

THERE DID NOT SEEM to be anything even remotely noteworthy about the case: burglary, second floor office safe.

"How much was taken?" said Sergeant Moskowitz.

"About eight thousand dollars worth of negotiable bonds," said Lawrence Aker, a chubby, middle-aged lawyer whose office had been robbed.

Moskowitz listed the figures in his notebook. He carried a notebook — not a little pad that fitted neatly into the pocket, like those other detectives carried — but a notebook, a three-hole black loose-leaf binder, in which he kept meticulous notes.

These notes were destined, when the case was closed or abandoned, to be filed with great precision in a filing cabinet he kept in the squadroom. These notes would form the basis for his reports — long, detailed reports which drove his Lieutenant to distraction. It was rumored that Sergeant Moskowitz was the only detective in the five boroughs to be up to date on his paperwork, and those who knew him doubted it not at all.

It was standard procedure to team him up with the rookie detectives during their first few months

on the squad — or for as long as they could take it. It was thought that in this way the rookies would be exposed to training in procedure and approved method — and that they would forever after appreciate any other partner they might find themselves stuck with.

"Have you touched anything in the room?" said Moskowitz.

"Only the safe," said Aker. "I had to see if anything was taken."

"Why did you think anything was taken?" said Brian Altman. Altman was Moskowitz's current partner, the new rookie on the squad. He held a B.A. in pre-law from Columbia and was finishing his Masters in Criminology at John Jay. He had placed fourth out of 350 officers on his written examinations. Many people, himself not least among them, foresaw a glowing future for him in the department.

"When I came in," said Aker, "I saw right away that the picture had been moved, the way it is now."

A pleasant pastel landscape, attached to the wall by hinges, had been swung out, revealing the wall safe behind it.

"I knew right away that someone had been to the safe," said Aker. "So I opened it to check. Sure enough, the bonds were gone."

"Was there anything else in the safe?" said Moskowitz.

"Just papers," said Aker. "Personal papers. They're still here."

"Look at this," said Altman, on the other side of the room.

He pointed to a hole near the top of the window, a neatly cut circle about four inches below the window lock.

"Stay away from it," said Moskowitz. "There may be glass on the rug."

"I'm wearing shoes, you know," said Altman.

"You might move the glass around," said Moskowitz.

"Oh!"

"Do you often keep valuables in the safe?" Moskowitz said, turning back to Aker.

"Yes," he said.

"And you have no alarm system?"

"Oh, but I do," said Aker. "That is to say that I do, but not last night."

"Why was that?" said Moskowitz.

"They're changing the alarm system," said Aker. "The company is upgrading security. They took out the system yesterday and they're supposed to put the new one in today."

"Seems a little late now," said Altman.

"Certainly does," said Aker, "but I'm insured for it."

"You are?" said Altman.

"Who isn't insured in New York?" said Aker.

"What time did you leave last night?" said Moskowitz.

"About seven-thirty," said

Aker.

"We will have some men going over your office this morning," said Moskowitz. "You can have it back tomorrow."

"That's okay," said Aker. "I'm due in court today anyway."

"A burglary case, by any chance?" said Altman.

"No," said Aker. "Divorce. Pays better than criminal law. Is it all right if my secretary uses her office out front today? Calls and things?"

"Yes, that's fine," said Moskowitz.

"Well, thank you both for your help," said Aker, and he left the office, taking care not to touch anything on his way out.

"He's insured," said Altman after Aker had left.

"Yes," said Moskowitz, without looking up from his notebook, in which he was still writing.

"He's insured. And the one night the alarm system is out, he gets robbed. That's more than coincidence."

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps, nothing!" said Altman. "Who else would have known about changing the alarm system?"

"The security company," said Moskowitz. "Anyone in the building who cared to look. Any outsider who could look through the window. The cleaning staff."

"All right," said Altman. "Now what?"

"Now homework," said Moskowitz. "As soon as Forensic takes over, you go check out Aker and I'll check the security company."

"Check out Aker?"

"Bank balance. Credit rating. Neighbors. Hobbies."

"Then you think he did it," said Altman.

"No," said Moskowitz, "but check him out. That's procedure."

(from Moskowitz's notebook)
Philip Security and
Alarm Company
1457 West 63rd Street
555-6941
Reginald Frost, President

Frost states that the change of security system was made at the Company's suggestion, based on their yearly evaluation of customer need.

Equipment for changeover included company panel truck and an amount of easily visible electrical material. Three men, all wearing company overalls, were involved in the job. They were at work from 10:00 A.M. until 2:00 P.M. on Monday, the 17th. The need for an additional part required them to leave on Monday and plan to return on Tuesday.

The system covers the door and windows. The safe is Aker's own.

The company does not sell or lease safes.

Frost thinks Aker's insurance company may sue his insurance company for losses.

Frost has never met Aker. Sales and maintenance have been carried out by company employees.

Reginald Donald Frost:
No criminal record
Bank balances:
Chase Manhattan, 72nd and 5th
Savings: $44,862.75
22,400.00
12,807.27
Checking: 2,471.85
No outstanding loans
Home: 8658 Valley View Road, Long Island.
purchased March 1961
monthly mortgage payment $560.
four years left on mortgage
Married: Emma Denton Frost
housewife
Children:
Harris, age 18, attending Hunter College
Phyllis, age 15, G.W. Carver H.S.

Philip Security and Alarm Company:
Est. 1965
Owned entirely by R.D. Frost
Employs 15:
8 technicians
3 salesmen
2 secretaries
1 accountant
1 president

Observations:
Philip Security and R.D. Frost appear solvent. No apparent motive.
Aker did not know until Monday afternoon that the alarm system would be out until the next day.
Company employees were very visible. Anyone could have been aware of the work being done.
The security company has no record of the combination of Aker's safe.

Questions:
Why didn't Aker mention that the changeover was originally scheduled to be done in one day?
Why was Aker not more upset?
Why was Frost not more upset?
Why did the security company fail to bring all the necessary parts on Monday?

ALTMAN FOUND MOSKOWITZ the next morning in the forensic laboratories.

"You were right," said Altman. "Aker was clean."

Moskowitz opened his notebook. "Tell me," he said.

"Well," said Altman, "I checked with his bank and he's got lots of —"

"Did you write it down?" said Moskowitz.

"Sure," said Altman, "but I know it."

"Yes," said Moskowitz, "but please read it."

Altman flipped open his pad, a little petulantly. "He has $73,000

in the bank," he said.

"Which bank?"

"First National City," Altman read from his notes. "He owns his own house, doesn't owe any money. He doesn't drink, smoke, gamble or fool around. And he's a boy scout."

"A boy scout?" said Moskowitz.

"Every Monday and Thursday," said Altman. "Troop 477. Holds meetings in the church basement."

Moskowitz wrote it down. "Anything else?" he said.

"What else do you want?" said Altman. "The man is Mr. Clean. The angels bow when he passes."

Altman watched to see if Moskowitz would write that down as well. He didn't.

Miller, the lab technician, entered the lab from the cramped office he shared with the three other lab technicians.

"Here it is, Moskowitz," he said, as he walked in. "Is your notebook open?"

"Go ahead," said Moskowitz.

"Now, just stop me if I go too fast or if your pen runs out of ink or anything," said Miller. "I certainly don't want you to leave anything out. Universes would fall if you missed anything."

He waved his hands dramatically in the air.

"Go ahead," said Moskowitz.

"The place was loaded with prints," said Miller, "most of them unreadable, of course. Of the good prints, most are the lawyer's."

"Aker's," said Altman.

"Right — Aker's," said Miller. "Then there are the secretary's, the janitors', like that. There are a few we couldn't identify — clients, maybe. And there was one funny one."

"What's funny about a fingerprint?" said Altman.

"Not what," said Miller. "Where. There was a print on the back of one of the picture frames."

"The one in front of the safe?"

"No," said Miller. "One of the others. Picture of wild geese, I think. Print was on the right side of the picture as you face it, about four inches from the top."

"What was it doing there?" said Altman.

"Don't ask me," said Miller. "How am I supposed to know? I'm only a lowly lab technician. You guys with the guns and the badges — the Super-heroes of Urban America — you guys figure it out."

"What finger?" said Moskowitz, looking up from his book.

"On the back of the frame?"

"Yes."

"Thumb," said Miller. "Right thumb. Very clear. Good full print."

"Okay," said Moskowitz.

"But if I were guessing," said Miller, "which I'm not, I'd say that anyone who was looking for a wall safe might move a few pictures around while he was look-

ing."

"Did you run the prints through?" said Altman.

"Yes, son," he said. "The ones we haven't got, we sent along to Washington. They're not back yet."

"What about the safe?" said Moskowitz.

"Not a hard safe to pick," said Miller. "Not easy, mind you, but not too bad. Beyond the talent of a shlemiel, but any pro could do it in under twenty minutes."

"Anything else?"

"Let me see," said Miller, checking his notes. "The hole in the window was done with a glass cutter. No glass inside or outside; must have taken it with him. It was a very nice job, all in all."

Moskowitz finished writing. "Thank you," he said. "Let me know when the prints get back."

"Sure thing, Moskowitz. Hey, son," he said to Altman," how long have you been working with Moskowitz?"

"About three weeks," said Altman.

"I give you another week," said Miller, "at the outside."

With that he laughed and went back to his office.

"Now we wait for the report from Washington," said Altman.

"Certainly," said Moskowitz. "But there are a few things we can do while we're waiting."

"Like what?"

"I'm going back to the security company this morning," said Moskowitz. "You go back to Aker's office building."

"What do you want from Aker's office?" said Altman.

"Nothing," said Moskowitz. "But I want to know if anyone was in the building late Monday night and if they saw or heard anything."

Altman sighed. "Okay," he said. "Is that it?"

"No," said Moskowitz. "I also want to know if anyone in either of the two apartment buildings across the street saw anything."

"There must be a hundred apartments in those buildings," said Altman.

"Perhaps," said Moskowitz, "but you only have to check the apartments that face Aker's office."

"Oh, that's right," said Altman.

"Yes," said Moskowitz. "And, Brian, try to get a little more detail into your reports."

"Right," he said. "More detail."

(from Altman's pad)

No one in the office building saw anything.

I ascertained this by checking with the following offices and suites:

101, 102, 103-5, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 201, 202-4, 205, 207, 208, 209, 210, 301-6, 307, 308, 309, 310, 401, 402, 403, 404-7, 408-10, 501, 502, 503, 504,

505-6, 507-8, 509, 510, 601-8, 609, 610, 701, 703, 704, 705-6, 707-8, 709-10, 801, 802, 803, 804, 805, 806-7, 808-10.

I did not check with 206, because it is Mr. Aker's office and we have already been there. I did not check with 702 because it is vacant.

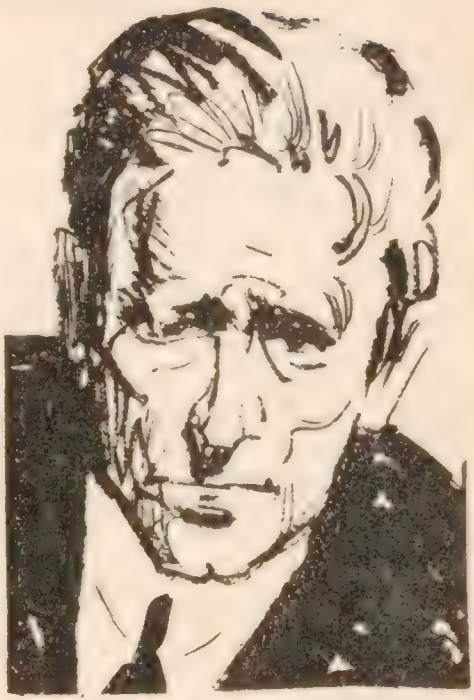
No one was in the building after 8:00 P.M. except the janitors. I spoke to the janitors. They are:

Dalton Silvera. Age 48, employed since 1967. No police record. Married. One child. Likes pepperoni pizza. Collects stamps.

Jesus Martin. Age 31. Employed here for six months. Aggravated assault, 1973, suspended sentence. Unmarried, but says he dates a lot. Likes girls who own their own cars. Hates classical music except Brahms.

Manuel Santos. Age 34. Employed two years. No police record. Married. Six children. Met Dustin Hoffman in an elevator. Is in favor of socialized medicine, especially in maternity cases.

The janitors clean each office in the building two nights out of three. Monday night was an off night for Aker's office. No



janitor went into his office Monday night. They were out of the building by 11:30. No one saw or heard anything unusual.

I checked the two apartment buildings across the street, no. 65 and no. 73.

No. 65: The following apartments face Aker's building:
103, 105, 107, 109, 203, 205, 207, 209, 303, 305, 307, 309, 403, 405, 407, 409, 503, 505, 507, 509, 603, 605, 607, 609

No one was home at: 107, 203, 205, 307, 505, 507, 509, 605.

Tenants in the other apartments reported seeing nothing unusual.

No. 73: the following apart-

ments face Aker's building: 103, 106, 110, 112, 203, 206, 210, 212, 303, 306, 310, 312, 403, 406, 410, 412, 503, 506, 510, 512.

No one was home at: 106, 110, 206, 303, 312, 410, 503, 512.

Tenants in the other apartments reported seeing nothing unusual.

Mrs. Hannah Beth Siegal, No. 73, Apt. 510, age 76, reports that since her TV broke three years ago (RCA black-and-white portable, 19″) she spends her time looking out her window. She says that Tuesday was notable for a minor traffice accident at about 10:00 A.M. (a cab hit a green Chevy) and for a window washer on Aker's building from about noon until about 4:00 P.M. Mrs. Siegal likes the scaffolding. She says it reminds her of the cliff divers in Acapulco, which she visited with her late husband, Bertram, in June, 1954.

Mrs. Siegal is sure that she saw nothing unusual until she went to sleep at about 2:00 A.M. This would place the time of the robbery after 2:00 A.M. Tuesday morning.

I hope this is detailed enough for you.

THE THREE MEN WERE in the back of the building, loading equipment into the van, when Moskowitz came up.

"Which one of you is Philip Ortega?" he said.

"I am," said one of them, glancing over his shoulder while he loaded a small crate into the van. "Why?"

"I'd like to talk to you about the alarm system you worked on Monday," said Moskowitz.

Ortega stopped working and looked at Moskowitz. He eyed the dark grey suit and the big black notebook.

"Are you from the insurance company?" he said.

"No," said Moskowitz. Police."

He took his badge out of his jacket pocket and showed it to Ortega.

"Okay. Take five," Ortega said to the other two men.

"Were those men with you on Monday?" said Moskowitz as the other two men went into the building.

"No," said Ortega. "George is off today, and Pavan is working the other van."

Moskowitz sat down on the rear loading area of the van and opened his notebook. Ortega leaned against the building.

"How long have you worked here?" said Moskowitz.

"Eight years," said Ortega. "I'm senior technician."

"Were you the one who installed Mr. Aker's security initially?"

"I don't remember," said Ortega. "We service a lot of

places."

"But you've been there before?"

"Sure," said Ortega. "Maybe installation — I don't remember. But I've done maintenance there before."

"What kind of maintenance?"

"Just service checks," said Ortega. "We check every system three times a year."

"Was there ever any problem with Mr. Aker's system?"

"I don't know offhand," said Ortega. "You'd have to check the records. They keep all that stuff on file in the office."

"I see," said Moskowitz, making a note on the margin of the page.

"Mr. Frost tells me that there was a part missing on Monday," said Moskowitz, "so that you couldn't finish on that day."

"That's right," said Ortega.

"What part?" said Moskowitz.

"A C-96 Lock Alarm Relay," he said.

Moskowitz looked up from his notes. "I didn't get that," he said. "What was it?"

"C-96 Lock Alarm Relay," Ortega said slowly. He watched Moskowitz write it carefully in his notes.

"Okay," said Moskowitz.

"What is all this about anyway?" said Ortega. "You're writing down every word like I was the President or somebody. I didn't have anything to do with stealing anything. I just went to change the system over. There was a part missing, so I had to leave it for a day. Okay?"

"Yes," said Moskowitz. "You said that."

"I know I said that," Ortega said, growing angry. "Listen to me. I've been in this business for fifteen years. All it takes is one dumb cop to get one dumb idea in his hand, and I'm out of work. I'll never be able to get another job in this business. This is a security company. Everyone who works with the systems has to be bonded. You start dragging my name into a robbery thing and I've had it."

Moskowitz looked up and closed his notebook. "I'm not accusing you of anything," he said.

"Not yet, you're not," said Ortega. "I've answered all the questions I'm going to. You can take your questions —"

"Mr. Ortega," Moskowitz said. "I have to ask these questions. If you cooperate, I ask you three or four more questions, I close my book, and I go away. If you don't cooperate, I call a squad car and take you to the station to ask the questions. I tell your boss you're coming to the station with me and everything gets blown all out of proportion. Do you understand me?"

Ortega stood for a moment, weighing the alternatives. At last he leaned back against the building.

"Okay," he said. "Finish off

and let me get back to work."

Moskowitz opened his notebook again. "This C-96 Lock Alarm Relay," he said, reading his notes. "Did you know you needed it when you loaded the truck for the job?"

"We needed four," said Ortega, "one for each window. I only took three."

"Why?"

"They come four to a box," said Ortega. "*Here!*"

He reached over Moskowitz's head into the van, pulled out a small box and handed it to Moskowitz. the box had *C-96* stamped on it. Moskowitz opened it and spilled the contents into his hand — four small electronic relays.

"I took a closed box," said Ortega. "I didn't check it. I figured there were four relays in it. When I opened it at the job, there were three."

"When did you take it?" said Moskowitz.

"I loaded up Friday afternoon for Monday morning," said Ortega. "We usually load up in the afternoon for a morning job and in the morning for an afternoon job."

"Where was the truck over the weekend?"

"Down there," said Ortega, pointing. "In the garage."

"Who has access to the truck in the garage late Friday or early Monday?" said Moskowitz.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, who could have taken something out of there before Monday morning?"

"Oh, anybody," said Ortéga. "The van isn't locked and the garage isn't locked from the inside entrance, only from the street. Anyone could have been there after we loaded Friday or before we left Monday."

"I see," said Moskowitz.

"But you're way off on this," said Ortega. "There was just a relay out of the box. Someone else used one and put the box back. That's all there was to it. He should have written *three* on the box, so we would have known. But that's all there was to it. No big deal."

"I see," said Moskowitz.

THE LIEUTENANT CALLED Moskowitz and Altman in the next morning.

"You're off the case," he said to them.

"What do you mean?" said Altman.

"Nothing you've done," said the Lieutenant. "Got this from the Captain." He handed the note to Moskowitz.

> Effective this date the department is relieved of responsibility in the investigation of the burglary at the office of L. Aker this past Monday night. I have been instructed that Government agents will continue the investigation. The department will be called in should there

arise the need for the laying of criminal charges under our jurisdiction.

C. Albert, Captain

"Must have been one hell of a fingerprint you sent in," said the Lieutenant.

"Must have been," said Moskowitz.

"Now what?" said Altman when they had left the Lieutenant's office. "A new case?"

"Sooner or later," said Moskowitz. "First we have to finish up the reports on this one."

"More reports?" said Altman. "Can you claim disability for writer's cramp?"

"Actually," said Moskowitz, "your last report was pretty good."

"Thanks terribly," Altman said.

"There were just one or two points you didn't cover."

"Like what?" said Altman.

"You didn't check out the window washer, for one thing."

"Why would I want to check out the window washer?"

"He was on the ledge the day of the burglary," said Moskowitz, "and the burglar entered from the ledge."

"Yes," said Altman, "but that was hours later. The washer was gone by mid-afternoon, and the burglary didn't take place until after two the next morning."

"Perhaps," said Moskowitz. "And another thing. There are still a number of people you haven't spoken to in the buildings across the street."

"They weren't home," said Altman.

"They might be home now," said Moskowitz.

"Well, it doesn't matter now," said Altman. "We're off the case anyway."

"Yes," said Moskowitz, "but there's still the paperwork."

"So?"

"I don't like loose ends in my paperwork."

Aker's office was empty when Moskowitz came in. Aker had been told to move out again so that the government agents could go over the office, but the agents themselves had not yet arrived.

Moskowitz spent a few minutes at the safe. He listed the serial number in his book and checked the door and dial of the safe for dents or chisel marks. There were none. Then he laid his book on the desk and went to the window.

The hole in the window had not been fixed. It had been neatly cut, Moskowitz saw, just a few inches below the window lock, large enough for a few fingers to reach in and open the lock. He looked the glass over carefully. Near one of the top corners were a few flecks of dried paint, the same color as the window frame.

He picked at one of them tentatively. Except for a few water marks and smudges, the window was fairly clean. Moskowitz ran

his finger over some of the marks. Two marks just beneath the hole smudged as he ran his finger over them. The rest of the marks were apparently on the outside of the glass.

For a moment, he stepped back and noted the angle at which the sun shone through the hole in the window, and then he got down on his knees and ran his hand slowly over the carpet beneath the window. He could feel nothing unusual.

"Don't move, please," said a soft, very confident voice behind him.

Moskowitz did not move.

"Now please clasp your hands behind your neck," said the soft voice, "and get up slowly."

"I am police," said Moskowitz.

"Of course," said the soft voice. "Clasp your hands behind your neck and get up slowly."

Moskowitz struggled to his feet, his hands behind his neck. Behind him, he could hear more than one man moving around.

"Now, turn around slowly," said the soft voice.

Moskowitz turned around.

The soft voice, he discovered, belonged to a very large man holding a very large gun. He was flanked on both sides by other men with other guns.

"Who are you?" said the soft voice.

"Seymour Moskowitz," said Moskowitz. "Sergeant, New York Police Department."

"Shield?" said the voice.

"Front right jacket pocket," said Moskowitz.

The voice motioned to one of his associates, who put his hand in Moskowitz' pocket and looked at the contents. He nodded. The voice put the gun back into the shoulder holster.

"I am sorry," said the voice, "but of course we couldn't know who you were."

"Yes," said Moskowitz. "And who are you?"

"Federal investigators," he said. "I'm Bradley. This is Manilow, and this is Peacock."

"Shields?" said Moskowitz.

Bradley frowned for an instant, but produced a shield from his pocket and motioned for his men to do the same. Moskowitz looked at the shields briefly and returned them.

"Are you aware, Moskowitz," said Bradley, "that the investigation has been transferred to the federal branch?"

"Yes," said Moskowitz.

"Then what are you doing here?" he said, with noticeably less politeness.

"I'm finishing up my investigation to this point," said Moskowitz. "I have a report to file."

"Of course," said Bradley. "There are always reports."

The four men stood for a moment, uncomfortably eyeing each other.

"If you are finished here, Sergeant," Bradley said, "we can get started."

"Fine," said Moskowitz. "I may want to drop by a little later to check out one or two small things, if you don't mind."

"Actually," said Bradley, trying to smile but failing, "I think that since we have a lot of work to do here, and since you are off of it anyway, maybe you had better just leave us to our work and find something else to bother about."

Moskowitz said nothing.

"Good-bye, Sergeant Moskowitz," said Bradley, moving to the side to leave a clear path.

"Good-bye," said Moskowitz. He headed toward the door, picking up his notebook from the desk as he went.

"Hold it!" said Bradley. "What are you taking?"

"The book is mine," said Moskowitz.

"Yes. Well, you won't mind if we just make sure."

Peacock pulled the book out of Moskowitz's hand and leafed through it quickly. "What is this stuff?"

"Notes on the investigation," said Moskowitz.

Bradley's eyebrows rose. "Really?" he said. "You wouldn't mind if we borrowed that for a day or two, Sergeant. It might be of some help."

"I don't think so," said Moskowitz. "As you say, I'm off the case, and I need the book to finish my report."

"Oh, yes," said Bradley. "Your report."

"My report," he said and took the book from Peacock.

"Good-bye again, Sergeant," said Bradley. "Nice meeting you."

"I CAN'T HELP YOU, Moskowitz," said the voice on the phone.

"What's the matter, Connelly?"

"Nothing's the matter," said Connelly. "It's just over my head, that's all."

"How is that?" said Moskowitz. You're FBI. They're FBI. All I want to know is a little about what's happening here."

"I know," said Connelly. "You told me. I checked into the thing and it's over our heads."

"Look," he said. "If you're all FBI . . ."

"They're not FBI, Moskowitz," Connelly said. "There are feds and there are feds. Those guys are not ours."

"CIA?" said Moskowitz.

"Let's not play initial games," Connelly said. "Neither of us knows all the initials. All *I* know is that it's over our heads. Your fingerprint check came in. It went into the computer banks and the next thing everything is shut up tighter than a drum. The computer printed out 'classified' and passed the information upstairs."

"And these people are from

upstairs?"

"The penthouse," said Connelly.

"Okay," said Moskowitz. "Thanks a lot."

"For nothing," said Connelly. "But Moskowitz —"

"Yes?"

"Leave me out of this," he said. "Keep my name out of the book."

"Yes. Of course," he said.

"Talk to you," said Connelly.

The man cornered Altman on the stairs between the fourth and fifth floors of no. 65. The man flashed his ID.

"I'm Peacock," he said.

"How pleasant for you," said Altman, looking at the card.

"I've been following you for the last forty-five minutes," said Peacock. "Why are you asking questions?"

Altman reached his hand into his pocket to pull out his shield. Instinctively, Peacock moved his hand toward his gun.

"Easy, easy," said Altman, taking his shield out with thumb and forefinger. "Let's not be hasty, Peashot."

"Peacock."

"Whatever," said Altman.

Peacock looked at the shield. "I don't give a damn about this," he said. "You're off the case. Don't you know you're off the case?"

"I know," said Altman. "I'm only finishing off a few loose ends for the report."

"What *is* this with reports?" said Peacock. "Is that all they pay you guys for? Writing reports? Isn't there anything else happening in New York for you guys to bother with? That other guy and now you."

"What other guy?"

"With the notebook," said Peacock.

"Sergeant Moskowitz."

"That's right," he said. "Moskowitz."

"Where did you see him?" said Altman.

"Listen to me," he said, ignoring the question. "You are off the case. *Off* it. I don't care about your loose ends and your reports. Stay off this thing. We don't want interference. We don't want problems. We don't want anyone messing up our investigation. You are playing out of your league here."

"Out of my league," said Altman. "A catchy phrase."

"This is a federal investigation," said Peacock, reddening slightly. "You have been relieved of jurisdiction in this case. You are asking for trouble if you don't leave it alone. There are charges of insubordination and interference that can be laid if you don't leave it alone. I am not playing around."

Peacock straigtened his jacket. "I hope you understand me, Detective," he said.

"Very clear, Mr. Pecan," he said.

Peacock turned and descended the stairs to the fourth floor.

"Must have been one hell of a fingerprint," Altman said after him.

Moskowitz waited in Miller's office. It was an uncomfortable experience for him. Miller and the three other technicians who shared the cramped little office with him were ostentatiously dedicated to anarchy, or so it seemed to Moskowitz's orderly mind.

Papers, journals, books, were strewn around the room like so much confetti on New Year's Eve. The two small desks in the room were buried under piles of reports, paper scraps, and used lunch bags. Manila folders and loose papers overflowed out of the open cabinet drawers and lay in apparent disarray all around the floor.

The whole office seemed to be a sculpture in paper of the bursting of a dam. He had a strong desire to run out to the street to breathe. His escape was cut short by Miller's entrance.

"Thanks for coming down, Moskowitz," said Miller. "Pull up a chair."

"Where?" said Moskowitz.

Miller looked around the room.

"Or stand," he said. "It won't take a minute."

Miller went to one of the desks and, after searching for a moment, found what he was looking for under an ashtray on the top of one of the smaller piles.

"I've ID'ed the fingerprint," he said. "The one behind the

picture."

"How?" said Moskowitz, taking the paper.

"Army files," said Miller. "If the FBI can't ID from criminal files, the next step is usually the Defense Department."

Moskowitz glanced at the paper. "We're off the case, you know," he said.

"Oh, I know," said Miller. "One of the federal apes came in the other day when I was out and took my file on the case."

"How did he find it?" said Moskowitz.

They both looked around the room for a minute.

"Damned if I know," said Miller.

"Does the Captain know he took the file?" said Moskowitz.

"Captain's permission," said Miller. "'Cooperation with our federal colleagues' he said. I don't think he was any too happy about it."

Moskowitz folded the paper neatly and inserted it into his notebook.

"Listen, Miller," he said, "when you checked Aker's office on Tuesday, what did you do to the window?"

"The window?" said Miller. "Let me see. We checked for prints on the outside, near the hole, and on the inside, on the window lock and on the bottom of the frame."

"You didn't wash the window, did you?" said Moskowitz.

"The department doesn't *do* windows, Moskowitz," he said.

"I AM FOURTEEN YEARS in America," said the window washer. "I go from Hungary to Paris after '56. And from Paris I go to Canada and finally, fourteen years ago, I come to America."

The window washer looked to be about fifty years old, but his physical condition appeared good, Altman noted. He was trim enough, there was healthy color in his cheeks, and when he spoke, he gestured very animatedly, but very precisely, showing good muscle control and perceptual judgment.

"I am Szemak," he said. "Bela Szemak. But here everybody makes jokes. You know. Bela — Bela Lugosi — Dracula, bite your neck."

He laughed at this, showing a set of crooked teeth.

"So I call myself Bill," he said. "Bill Szemak. No one can say Szemak, but everyone says Bill okay."

He laughed again.

"How long have you worked for the —" Altman checked his notes "— Sparkle Window Cleaning Service?"

"Six months only," said Szemak. "Before that I work many things. I work construction for five years. I am waiter. I am janitor. Once I am a barber. I take a class in being a barber, cutting hair, you know. The first time I try, I do so bad they give me back my money and throw me out."

He laughed uproariously at this.

"The poor fellow whose hair I cut," he said. "I don't know if it is ever growing back."

Altman chuckled politely. "How did you get the job with Sparkle Window Cleaning?"

"I go to them," he said, "and I tell them, 'Look at me. I am strong. I am healthy. I work construction for five years. I have a head for high places. You know.' So they give me the job."

"Does it pay well?"

"Not so well like construction job," said Szemak, "but it's easier. You work by yourself. No boss on you. Also, I have no family. I don't need money so much."

"No family?"

"Not since Hungary," he said. He looked down at the floor and spoke more gently. "I had brothers and sisters in Hungary. They fight also when the time was to

fight. I have to run, you know. I don't know where they are. Maybe they are okay, change their names or something. I don't know."

Altman looked at him closely. There were deep lines in the face and grey hairs outnumbered the dark hairs on his head. "When did you wash the windows on the second floor?" he said, not knowing how to change the subject.

Szemak looked up. "Oh," he said. "Well, I start at the top of the building and work down always. So, I start at about nine o'clock; I finish about four or four-thirty. I must be at the second floor around three o'clock, maybe a little later."

"Did you see anything unusual when you were washing on the second floor?"

"No," he said. "I don't see anything. One thing I learn is you don't look inside the windows too much. Always there is somebody who thinks you are looking too hard at the girls or the money or something, you know. So I don't look much. But I don't see anything that I remember."

"Okay, Mr. Szemak," said Altman.

"Bill," he said. "Everyone calls me Bill."

"Bill," said Altman. "If you remember something, please call me at the station."

Altman wrote the number down and handed the paper to Szemak.

"If I remember anything I call," said Szemak.

FOR A MINUTE the Lieutenant said nothing. He merely stared at the two detectives sitting uncomfortably on the other side of his desk.

"The Captain is very unhappy," he said at last. "Shall I tell you why, Moskowitz — Altman?"

Moskowitz and Altman said nothing.

"Let me tell you why the Captain is not happy," said the Lieutenant.

The Lieutenant had a number of ways of dressing down his men. Sometimes he yelled. Sometimes he insulted. Today he was using one of his favorite devices. It was known in the squad room as "the kindergarten teacher."

"The Captain is unhappy because you are not listening to him," said the Lieutenant. "The Captain loves all of his detectives, and it makes him feel bad when they don't listen to him."

"Lieutenant . . ." Altman began, but the Lieutenant put his finger to his lips to request quiet.

"First, the federal officers inform the Captain that they are taking over one of his cases. The Captain doesn't like that very much. He does not like federal officers very much, because they invariably throw their weight around and screw up everything. But the Captain has no choice, so the Captain sends me a note to take you off the case. Do you remember the note, Moskowitz?"

Moskowitz nodded.

"Do you remember the note, Altman?"

Altman nodded.

"You both remember the note. Good! Now, after the Captain sends the note he assumes that he is finished with the nasty federal officers. But is he, Moskowitz — Altman?"

They knew the answer.

"No, he is *not!*" said the Lieutenant, blowing up at last. "Because two hard-nosed jackass detectives cannot follow a simple, direct order!"

"Listen, Lieutenant . . ." Altman began.

"And who the hell do you think calls the Captain at two o'clock in the morning to tell him the two detectives he pulled off the case are still on it?"

Altman gulped.

"You guessed it, bright boy! Smart-mouth feds threatening to call the commissioner — do you understand me? The commissioner — and the mayor — and the governor."

Moskowitz stared at the floor. Altman shifted in his chair, trying to sink lower into it.

"And who do you think the chief calls at two in the morning to inform him of your little adventures?"

"You?" whispered Altman.

"That's *right!* You *got* it!" said the Lieutenant, who was, by now, leaning over the desk and shouting himself hoarse.

"*Two-ten a.m.!* Waking my wife, my two kids, the cat and the goldfish. What the devil have you two been up to?"

"We . . ." said Altman.

"We *what?*" said the Lieutenant.

"We just wanted to finish the report," Altman said lamely.

"The *report!*" The Lieutenant stood up, suddenly straight. "The *report!* The *report!*"

For a brief moment, the Lieutenant looked for all the world as if he were going to pick up his desk and throw it at them. Then, slowly, with great force of will, he regained control of himself and sat down.

"What is it with you, Moskowitz?" he said with exaggerated softness. "Do you have a disease? Are you contagious? I give you a friendly, intelligent, outgoing, bright-boy rookie, and inside of a few weeks, he's violating orders and risking a hassle from the commissioner for the sake of the report. No one else writes reports. Fabrizi hasn't handed in a readable report in eight years."

The Lieutenant leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"One morning, Moskowitz," he said, "You are going to come into the squad room to find your whole file cabinet in flames. Every report, every last page of that ridiculous black notebook will be gone, Moskowitz. All gone. Of course, we will institute a search for the arsonist. But we'll never find him. And do you know why,

Moskowitz?"

He opened his eyes and leaned forward.

"*Me*, Moskowitz," he said, jabbing himself in the chest. "It will be *me*. You'll never prove it, Moskowitz, but it will be me."

"Listen, Lieutenant," Altman said slowly, "we can beat the feds to this guy. We can show them up. How often do we get a chance to show the feds up? How often does the Captain get a chance?"

The Lieutenant stared at him for a long moment. "What do you know?" he said.

"We matched up the print," said Altman. "We know who did it."

Moskowitz glanced at Altman. Altman was shooting blind. He must have spoken to Miller.

"Who?" said the Lieutenant.

Moskowitz opened his notebook and leafed through several pages until he found the proper entry. "Brook," he said. "Alexander Brook."

"Have you put out an APB?" said the Lieutenant.

"No," said Moskowitz. "There's no point. He's dead."

"Dead?" Altman and the Lieutenant said it together.

"Car accident," said Moskowitz.

"Where did it happen?" said the Lieutenant. "When?"

"Washington, D.C.," said Moskowitz. "Two years ago."

(from Moskowitz's notebook)

ref: Army file #3B0928 J

Brook, Alexander Philip
Born: August 8, 1940
Enlisted: August 9, 1958, Brooklyn, New York
Basic Training: Fort Dix, New Jersey
Stationed: West Germany, 1959-60
South Korea, 1961-63
Viet Nam, 1963-66
Promotion to Sergeant: June 1961
Promotion to Lieutenant: February 1964
Transferred to Intelligence Corps: May 1966, Washington, D.C.
Promoted to Captain: December 1969
Resigned: May 1970
Next of Kin: Mrs. Marjorie Brook Bartlett (sister), 418 Pleasant View Drive, Englewood, New Jersey

Mrs. Bartlett says that Brook resigned his commission to work as a private consultant for the Epsilon Industries Corporation in New Haven, Connecticut. She does not know what work he was involved in for Epsilon, nor what work he did with Army Intelligence.

In April of 1975, he was on a business trip to Washington, D.C. He attended a party one evening and was on his way back to his hotel when the car in which he was riding with several

other men collided with a fuel truck, which exploded. The wreckage burned for several hours. All those involved in the accident, including the truck driver, were killed. The bodies were too badly burned to be identified.

Brook, who had no family, left everything to his sister. His estate consisted of over $40,000 in various bank accounts and a small house in New Haven.

Epsilon Industries Corporation
New Haven, Connecticut
Est. 1964
Fraser Vincent, Chairman of the Board
Assets: Dec. 1976 — $418,466,000
Profits: Jan. - Dec. 1976 — $4,402,000

The corporation deals primarily with government contracts in guidance systems and explosives technology. The company is currently involved in a number of classified projects related to missile defense systems.

Brook was chief of security for the New Haven Center of Epsilon Industries. The New Haven Center deals with design and theory. Testing, development and production are carried out in Florida. The current security chief is Colonel Brighton Rockford, U.S. Army (retired). Rockford was brought in after Brook's death and did not know Brook personally. Rockford says that Brook appears to have been an able security chief. He designed the alarm system and chose the safes and vaults for the Epsilon complex. He was particularly expert in his knowledge of safes, vaults and security systems. His specific areas of responsibility are classfied.

"WEATHER BUREAU. Good morning. The temperature at the airport this morning is . . ."

"No, no," said Altman, on the other end of the phone. "I don't care about that. I want to know about rain."

"We are not forecasting rain today. However, there is a twenty-five percent chance of precipitation tomorrow . . ."

"Not tomorrow either," said Altman. "Last week."

The phone went dead.

"She hung up on me," said Altman.

"Don't call the forecast number. Call the meteorology labs," said Moskowitz.

"Oh," he said. "Will anyone be there this late?"

"Yes," said Moskowitz. "Twenty-four hours a day."

They were alone in the squad room. The few detectives who were on duty at 2:00 a.m. were out on calls or drinking coffee with the uniformed cops downstairs. One of the few nice things about bur-

glaries was that most were not discovered until morning.

Moskowitz was going over his notes. He had taken them carefully out of his notebook, and they lay before him now, spread out neatly on the desk. One by one, he read through the pages and wrote a list of questions out on a new sheet of paper.

1. How did Brook get out of the car?
2. Where did he go?
3. Why?
4. Why Aker's office?
5. Why federal officers?
6. Why were there only three relays in the box?
7. Why the marks on the windows?
8. Why don't the janitors clean on Monday?

"You were right," said Altman, getting off the phone. "It hasn't rained since last Sunday morning. We may have a drought by next week."

"I see," said Moskowitz, and he underlined a section of notes on one page and began scribbling on another.

"Where is all this getting you?" said Altman, glancing at the papers.

"We begin with observation," said Moskowitz, suddenly sweeping his hand above the desk. "Then we question, based on the observation. When we answer the questions, we gain more complete understanding of the observations."

"*If* we answer the questions," said Altman.

"*If*," agreed Moskowitz. "And do you know from which criminologist the system comes?"

"Sherlock Holmes?"

"Close," said Moskowitz. "You miss by a mere twenty-three hundred years or so. Socrates."

"Socrates," said Altman, less than consumed with interest.

"Socrates," said Moskowitz. "Answers depend on careful, methodical observation."

He tapped his finger on the desk. Altman smiled. This was the closest Altman had ever seen Moskowitz come to passion.

"Are you tired, Sergeant?" he said.

Moskowitz sighed. "Yes," he said. "I think so. But I think I've almost got this done. Why don't you go home. It must be late."

"It's two-thirty," Altman said.

"Yes," said Moskowitz. "It must be late. I just need a little more time here."

With that he went back to his pages. Altman watched him for a while, reading, making notes, underlining, crossing out. Like a crossword puzzle, Altman thought just before he closed his eyes.

He was aware of shuffling papers, and he opened his eyes to see Moskowitz methodically placing his papers, one by one, back in the looseleaf binder. Altman looked at his watch; it was four-

twenty.

"Well?" said Altman.

Moskowitz snapped the notebook rings shut, closed his notebook, and looked up at Altman.

And smiled . . .

The Captain was not in the mood for it. "We are playing games this morning, Lieutenant?" he said, over the phone.

"No, sir," he said, "but Sergeant Moskowitz has some new information which might prove useful to the federal investigators."

"Christ!" said the Captain. "Moskowitz."

"Yes, sir," said the Lieutenant. "He's in my office now. We've invited the federal investigators in. I thought you might want . . ."

"I've told you to keep your people out of it," said the Captain. "Why are they still involved here?"

"Listen, Charlie," the Lieutenant said, as confidentially as he could. "Come on down. I think we've got something."

There was silence on the line for a moment. "Okay, Lou," said the Captain. "But you'd better have something good."

"Yes, sir," the Lieutenant said.

The Captain arrived at the same time as the federal investigators. Moskowitz made the introduction.

"I have to tell you, Captain," said Bradley, as he sat down, "that after our discussion on the phone the other evening, I was surprised to hear from your lieutenant this morning. I was under the impression that Sergeant Moskowitz had been taken off the case. Finally."

"We *are* off the case," Moskowitz broke in, saving the Captain from having to reply. "It's just that, having nearly finished our report, there were a number of conclusions we came to that we thought might be helpful."

"We've seen the lab report," said Bradley.

"Yes," said Moskowitz, "but perhaps we can add a few things to that report."

"Very well, Sergeant," Bradley said. "If it serves no other purpose than to get the New York Police Department off my back at last, I will hear you out."

He shot a quick look at the Captain, who cleared his throat uncomfortably.

Moskowitz began leafing through his notebook. The feds traded amused glances with each other.

"I'm really impressed with your orderliness," said Peacock. "I've been thinking of getting a notebook myself."

"It helps if you know how to read," said Altman.

"Here," said Moskowitz, ready to begin. He had either missed the brief exchange or had chosen to ignore it. "Now, apparently sometime after two a.m. on Tuesday morning, the thief entered by cutting a hole in the window and

opening the window lock, which was not on the alarm that night. He checked behind the pictures until he found the safe.

"He opened the safe, took the bonds, and left, either through the window or the office door."

"If this is what you've brought me here to tell me . . ." said Bradley.

Moskowitz looked at him. "Everything in order," he said.

"Yes," said the Captain from the other side of the room, "but let's get on with it."

"Yes, sir," said Moskowitz. "The print behind one of the paintings belongs to a Captain Alexander Brook, who was employed as security chief for the Epsilon Industries Corporation of New Haven, Connecticut. He was presumed to have died in an automobile accident two years ago in Washington, D.C., although his body was not identified at the time."

"But obviously," said the Captain, "he is not dead."

"Which," said Altman, "is what brought our visitors here down from Washington to investigate."

"Epsilon Industrial is involved with government missile contracts," said Altman. "The security chief would have to have had access to a great deal of highly classified material. If Brook is not really dead, he must have wanted to appear dead for a reason. The obvious reason would be —"

"To sell classified material safely," said the Captain.

"Very good, sir," said Moskowitz. "One can only speculate on how far sale of classified information could set our missile program back."

"*Moskowitz!*" said Bradley, standing up. "I know why we came here from Washington. I don't need you to tell me. More important, I don't need you to tell anyone else. Has it occurred to you that the reason we were put on this case is to keep the entire investigation under wraps?"

He turned to the Captain.

"I warned you about this," he said. "I told you to keep your people out of it. Why is it every local flatfoot suddenly sees himself as James Bond whenever there's a federal investigation in progress?

"I hold you responsible, Captain. There may be a violation of National Secrets Act here. In any case, I am reporting this continued insubordination and interference to your commissioner. You are about to go into retirement, Captain."

The Captain paled noticeably. He turned to the Lieutenant. "Lou . . ." he said.

"If you will control yourself, Mr. Bradley," said Moskowitz calmly, "I may be able to keep you from making a fool of yourself."

"Hardly likely," Altman mumbled to himself.

BRADLEY TURNED ANGRILY to Moskowitz. He was about to speak when something — perhaps Moskowitz's detachment, the fact that he seemed not in the least disturbed by Bradley's outburst — made him feel a touch less confident and he hesitated.

"Please sit down, Mr. Bradley," said Moskowitz. "I won't be too much longer."

Bradley sat down. The lieutenant smiled briefly at the Captain. The Captain did not smile back.

"Now, let's go over some of this," said Moskowitz, turning back to his notebook. "We place the time of the burglary after two a.m. on the basis of three witnesses. Mr. Aker saw nothing unusual when he left at seven-thirty. The window washer, Mr. . . ." Moskowitz had trouble reading the name.

"Szemak," said Altman.

"Yes," said Moskowitz. "Mr. Szemak saw nothing unusual when he was washing the windows about three p.m. or shortly thereafter. And finally, Mrs. Siegal, across the street, claims there was nothing unusual that night, and she went to sleep about two a.m. You spoke to Mrs. Siegal?"

"Of course," said Bradley. "Where are you going with all this?"

"When I was in the office," said Moskowitz, "the day we met, Mr. Bradley, I noticed that there were a number of small marks — water marks — outside the window. Did you notice them?"

"No," said Bradley. "So what?"

"They were probably made when the window washer cleaned the window," said Moskowitz. "Little trails left by stray drops of water."

"What of it?" said the Captain, who was as impatient as Bradley.

"There were also several little water marks inside the window," said Moskowitz. "Starting from the bottom of the hole and trailing down for a few inches."

"So how could water have gotten inside the hole, if the hole was cut eleven hours after the window washer was there?"

The feds looked at each other.

"Rain?" offered Peacock.

"No, Pequod," said Altman. "Not rain. It hasn't rained in New York since last Sunday."

"But how?" said Bradley. "How could the window washer miss the hole?"

"He didn't miss it," said Moskowitz. "He made it. What could be a more convenient way of cutting a hole unnoticed? He has every reason to be on the ledge and his body blocks the view from the street, so no one can see him cut the hole."

"The window washer!" said the Captain.

"But that doesn't work," said Bradley. "Aker was in his office until seven-thirty. If the hole was made at three . . ."

"Then Aker had to know about it," said Moskowitz.

"Aker and the window washer?" said Bradley. "Are you saying they were both in on it?"

"And don't forget the security company," said Altman. "Someone had to make sure that the alarm was disconnected before the hole was made."

"Who?" said Bradley. "The chief technician?"

"Perhaps," said Moskowitz. "I'm not sure. It could have been any of a number of people. Whoever removed the fourthe lock relay from the box, I should say."

"The president of the company makes the most sense," said Altman. "Remember, it had to be set up well in advance so that the window washer could be worked in too."

"This is ridiculous," said Bradley. "Do you know what you're saying? You're telling me that Aker, the window washer, the security company and Brook were all involved in an elaborate production to steal a paltry eight thousand dollars worth of bonds. That's ludicrous."

"He hasn't got it yet," said Altman. "You haven't got it yet, Bradley. Listen. They weren't after the bonds. They were after you."

"Me?"

"How difficult is it going to be," said Moskowitz, "for the government and Epsilon Industrial to restructure the missile system if Brook has been selling secrets?"

"That's classified," said Peacock.

"Very difficult," said Bradley, ignoring him. "Very difficult. Very expensive. Very time consuming."

"No doubt," said Moskowitz. "And all this is based on one fingerprint on the back of a picture."

Bradley closed his eyes and sat back heavily in his chair. "The fingerprint!" he said.

"By George," said Altman. "I think he's *got* it!"

"The purpose of the whole thing," said Moskowitz, "was to leave that print. They knew it would be sent to Washington sooner or later."

"It could set the program back years!" said Bradley.

"Is *that* classified?" said Altman.

"Wait a minute," said Peacock. "But then who came in the window?"

"Nobody, Peapod," said Altman. "That's the point. It was all a fake. Someone — probably Aker — planted the print sometime Monday. All the rest was to cover up the plant. Have you got that now, or shall I write it down for you?"

The Lieutenant looked at the Captain. The Captain was smiling.

"No," said Bradley suddenly.

Everyone looked at him.

"No," he said. "I wish I could buy it. I'd like to. But we can't

risk the security of the whole project on the strength of your speculation alone. It's not tight enough. It could still have been a very elaborate burglary."

"There's one more thing," said Moskowitz.

"Go ahead."

"Do you see the Lieutenant's certificate of commendation on the wall?"

He pointed to the far side of the room.

"Yes."

"Look behind it," said Moskowitz.

Bradley crossed the room, lifted the picture slightly, and looked behind it.

"There's nothing there," he said.

"No, of course not," said Moskowitz. "But look how you're holding the picture."

"How?"

"Your thumb in front, your fingers behind," said Moskowitz.

"Yes," he said. "What's unusual about that?"

"Nothing," said Moskowitz. "It's perfectly normal. In fact, you couldn't lay your thumb flat on the inside of the frame without taking the picture off the wall. No one could."

"But Brook wouldn't take it off the wall," said Bradley. "There was no reason for him to take it off the wall."

"No," said Moskowitz. "None at all."

"And Brook's print was on the back of the frame," said Bradley slowly, thinking it through. "A flat thumb print."

"Exactly," said Moskowitz.

Bradley returned to the chair. For a long moment, he was lost in thought, putting everything in order in his mind.

"Then it *had* to be a plant," he said finally.

"Yes," said Moskowitz, "I would think so."

"Captain Brook really did die in that accident in Washington," said Bradley.

"And it would seem that the missile system at Epsilon Industrial is safe," said Moskowitz.

"And now what?" said Altman. "You arrest the bunch of them and find out who organized the whole thing?"

Bradley's face was suddenly horror stricken.

"Good God, *no!*" he said. "We let them think they've outfoxed us, of course. It could put them off their guard for years. We just let the whole thing alone now."

The other two feds nodded.

"Moskowitz," said Bradley, "you will let the whole thing alone now?"

"Oh certainly," said Moskowitz. "I'm off the case. I just . . ."

"I know," said Bradley. "The report."

"Moskowitz nodded.

"Captain," said Bradley, "I suppose I owe you an apology."

The Captain smiled broadly.

"You bet you do," he said.

"Are we all finished with this?" Altman said, when they were back in the squad room.

"Oh yes," said Moskowitz. "Watch."

Moskowitz took his keys from his pocket and unlocked his file cabinet. From the second drawer he took an empty folder. He closed the drawer and took the folder to his desk. He wrote *Aker, Lawrence* on top and opened the folder wide.

Gently, he opened the rings of his notebook, took out all the paper and filed it carefully in the top drawer of the filing cabinet.

"I'm afraid to ask," said Altman, "but what's in the bottom drawer?"

Moskowitz opened it. Neatly stacked were several thousand sheets of blank looseleaf paper.

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CYLVIA K. MARGULIES, Publisher

Easy Money

by

MIKE TAYLOR

Trailing the senator's wife looked like a milk run to Northlake — but only the rain was what it seemed.

IT WAS THE KIND of night the travel brochures somehow forget to mention — endless sheets of heavy tropical rain swept the island, driven by a 20-knot Kona wind. Waikiki's hopelessly inadequate sewer system had given up the struggle hours earlier. Water was running four inches deep along Kalakaua Avenue.

Not that the weather had slowed the pair I was tailing. They were barhopping along the strip, dashing through the downpour from one joint to the next, laughing and carrying on like a couple of kids — or drunks. Shipwreck Kelly's, The Attic, Captain Nemo's, The Blue Dolphin, Keohne's . . . I was beginning to lose count.

I followed their erratic progress through dwindling crowds of die-hard tourists. The men wore their sodden aloha shirts and dripping plantation hats with an air of grim resignation — two thousand bucks for a Hawaiian vacation and they'd had to pick the rainy season. Their wives/ladyfriends had forsaken shoes and carried them in one hand. The other held up the hem of their fifty dollar muu-muus as they splashed through the swirling water.

The next stop was a smallish piano bar half a block off the main

drag called The Topless Turtle. It was dim inside and reasonably quiet compared to some of the discos previously visited. Probably in deference to its name, the three waitresses wore only sarongs. None of them looked like a turtle.

The lovebirds took seats at the piano. I found a bar stool where I could watch them in the mirror. For the first time I was close enough to overhear most of their conversation.

The lady was Amanda King. I was being paid $500 to see that she made it through the night without bringing shame and disgrace on the name of her husband, the Honorable John Belson King, senator from the great state of Nevada. The senator's wife was decked out in an aqua cocktail dress guaranteed to start male motors racing.

She was probably on the down side of forty but she was giving it a hell of a battle. Unfortunately, at the moment Mrs. King was, to put it bluntly if inelegantly, stewed to the gills. Her blonde, rain-frizzed hair kept falling across the right side of her face and she was having trouble with her words.

Her companion was a good-looking, slope-shouldered local beachboy ten years her junior called Rudy. His specialty was jaded *haole* women with goodly supplies of green. He also had the reputation of being somewhat of a rough character. He was wearing a black mesh pullover that showed off his body beautiful so I guessed it must be so.

I ordered a Cutty-and-water and lit a cigarette to combat the weariness. It was one-fifteen a.m. The place was about half full. The Philippino at the piano finished an average rendition of *I'll Remember You* and went on break.

"Sonofabitch," said Mrs. King to the piano man's retreating back. She inserted one of those long thin black cigarets that are all the rage into her holder and glared expectantly at Rudy. He scooped up her silver lighter and applied fire.

The waitress arrived with drinks — something tall and fruity for the lady and a Primo for Rudy. Amanda King fumbled out a roll of bills from her bag and peeled off a twenty. I saw the beachboy's interest quicken.

"Crummy joint," she informed the waitress. "Get you in here to buy a drink then the damn piano player quits! What a crock!"

"I'm sorry, ma'am. He'll be back in just a minute," the girl murmured and fled away to get change.

She wasn't exactly overdeveloped and as she walked away the beachboy said, loud enough for the people in the john to hear, "Hell, paste a couple of raisins on her back and you couldn't tell if she's coming or going."

Real class, Rudy.

Of course the girl's boyfriend had to be sitting at the bar, three

stools down from me. He spun around, a long-haired young surfer type, glaring at the pair. I glanced around — no sign of a bouncer. His girl was next to him at the waitress station. She whispered something urgently and he swung back to the bar, stony-faced.

I stared at my image in the backbar mirror and practiced looking disinterested. A sunlined, much-used face, but with everything still intact. The hairline was holding but there were touches of white at the temples. The eyes looked a little world-weary. They should. I knew the guy who lived behind them.

"Stopping here was a lousy idea," Amanda King said, reluctant to let the subject drop. "I thought we were going to hit some swinging places."

"Next stop, doll, next stop," Rudy replied. He frowned at her. "You had plenty of booze already, huh? Why don't we hang this up, go back to my place and really swing?"

She shoved her cleavage at him and simpered. "Pretty soon, honey. I'm just starting to get mellow."

On that note, Rudy went to the head. When he came out he stopped by the pay phone at the end of the alcove. While I could see him from the bar, he was out of Amanda King's sight. He dialed a local number, talked briefly, hung up. Back to the table for more stimulating conversation. A tingle of uneasiness ran across my scalp. I thought about an earlier phone call.

THE LONG DISTANCE CALL had come around eight o'clock, right in the midst of an important project. I was trying to convince Cheryl Jamison, who works for my answering service, of the therapeutic benefits of a waterbed — *my* waterbed, to be precise.

There were ghosts and static on the mainland circuit, but I still recognized the velvet-textured voice from all the recent primary coverage on the six o'clock news.

"Mr. Northlake? John Belson King here. You were recommended to me by an associate of yours here in Los Angeles. I have a problem which he felt you might help me with."

"You want me as your running mate?" Cheryl and several snifters of Hennessey Four-Star had made me a bit giddy.

I think he snorted. "Seriously now, Mr. Northlake. This is a highly confidential matter which requires your immediate attention."

"*I* require your immediate attention," Cheryl breathed in my other ear. I shoved her in the general direction of the waterbed.

"Okay, Senator, go ahead," I said in my best confidential investigator voice.

"This is rather delicate . . ." He took a long breath, like someone

about to dive into a pool of cold water. "It's my wife. Not to mince words, Mr. Northlake, Amanda has a drinking problem. Our marriage has deteriorated over the years until we remain together only because of the impact a divorce would have on my present political opportunities."

"It sounds like something off the front page of the *National Enquirer*," I said. "Can I assume that your wife is currently here in Honolulu?"

A pause followed by a sigh. "Yes. She slipped away and caught the United flight this afternoon. She's done this before, I'm afraid, but this is an extremely crucial period. You're aware that the California primary is less than a week away?"

"And you want me to . . . ?"

"Follow her, Mr. Northlake. Don't interfere with her — activities — unless it's absolutely necessary, but there must be no publicity. Occasionally, my wife loses her perspective. There must be no scandal attached to my name at this time."

"You don't want me to lock her in her hotel room and throw the key away?"

"I'd prefer not. I don't believe Amanda would brook that kind of interference with what she considers her private life. She holds the power to severely disrupt my campaign and must be appeased. At the same time, I cannot afford to have her become involved in some escapade that the media might get wind of.

"I feel there's very little chance of her being recognized in your city. Thus, if she can be prevented from attracting the attention of either the authorities or the news media until I arrive there tomorrow . . . I'm relying on your judgment and discretion, Mr. Northlake."

He was laying it on thick. Discretion, excretion! I sighed. "Do you know where I can locate her?"

He did. One of three Waikiki hotels. This was not the first time, he repeated. He gave me the aliases she was likely to register under and a description. We discussed sordid financial matters briefly. He would be arriving at ten-thirty the next morning. I had slightly more than twelve hours to keep Mrs. Amanda King out of serious trouble. It sounded like easy money. Well, I've been wrong before.

I left Cheryl and the Hennessey and the waterbed and went out into the rainy night.

THE PERFECT PAIR had another round and left, just as the piano player came back. Fickle! I gathered up my change. As they went out, a tall guy in an off-the-rack aloha shirt slide off his stool and followed them. I gave him a couple of seconds and tagged along.

It had stopped raining for the time being. Mrs. King and her

beachboy friend turned left down Kuhio. So did the other guy. Hmmm! Another unknown factor. First the phone call and now this. Who was planning to do what to whom?

I cut across a parking lot and closed up behind my competition. There was a suspicious looking bulge in the back of his shirt, just above where the waistband of his pants would be. Now what? Sooner or later we were going to run afoul of one another. I decided to make it sooner, to spare him the kind of worry he was causing me.

I waited until he walked into a clot of shadows under some palms. Then I came up on him quickly, covered his pistol with one hand and did some things to his neck with the other. The struggle was brief. When he folded I dragged him back under the trees and eased him to the ground. It was a bad night for sleeping out. I hoped he wouldn't catch pneumonia.

Meanwhile, my charge and her dubious escort had gotten almost a block away. I hurried off in pursuit. Too late.

It was a smooth operation. The big black Lincoln eased up to the curb in a spray of water. The right rear door flew open. Rudy grabbed Amanda King by the neck and arm, propelled her into the rear seat and climbed in after her. A second later they were gone.

In my own inimitable style, I'd just blown it.

I double-timed up to the all-night Japanese place on the corner, used their pay phone to call Joe Tatami. Joe works for the motor vehicle department and never has quite enough bread to keep up with his taste for tender young things.

He made middle of the night sounds.

"This is Northlake. I need the owner of a '76 Mark V, license PYB 207, right away."

"Cripes, it's two in the morning."

"Fifty bucks."

"Alright, where do I call you?"

I gave him the number. Had a bowl of hot saimin and guarded the phone. Twenty minutes later it rang. The car was registered to one Lester Sakata, a name not entirely unknown to me.

I dug up another dime and called Jack Kilgore's Waialai apartment. A crack investigative reporter on the *Star-Bulletin* for fifteen years, Jack has a handle on every shady operation in the islands. The phone rang six times before he answered.

"*Mmmuuhhh?*"

"*Wake up*, Jocko! It's resurrection day and you've overslept."

He groaned. "Jim Northlake? What the hell?"

"An emergency. I need some information quick."

"Story?" he mumbled.

"Not this time, old buddy. Strictly off the record. Give me the latest you have on our old friend

Lester Sakata."

There was silence while he pumped some blood up to his brain. "let's see. Lester was still running with Biggy Chan's bunch when you had your run-in with him. That's been — what, four years? He went underground for a while after his boss bought it. Came back up about two years ago.

"Word is that he's one of the main snowmen for the West Coast now. If it's true, he must be good, because the cops haven't touched him. As a sideline, he still owns half a dozen Korean bars around town as a front for the Kalihi mob."

"Ummm. Does Fuji Kaneshiro still manage the Blue Lei?"

"Last I heard, yeah."

"Good! One more thing. Know if a beachboy called Rudy has any connections with Sakata?"

He yawned. "Can't say. I do know he's got several hard guys on his personal payroll. Somebody tried to waste him outside the Dunes a few months ago. He travels with company now."

"Thanks, Jack. I owe you." I gave him an edited version of what had happened. "If you don't hear from me by the dawn's early light, call HPD and give them the whole story."

I hung up and tried to make some sense out of what I knew. Fact — Rudy had a reputation as a grifter and tough guy, known to have associated with the underworld in the past. Fact — one of Lester Sakata's cars had been used in the snatch. Reasonable assumption — Rudy was working for Sakata. Which didn't add up.

Why would a big-time heroin supplier grab the senator from Nevada's sweet wife, assuming he knew who she was? Not for money, surely — he wouldn't jeopardize a lucrative dope operation with an amateur stunt like kidnapping. Okay, maybe he didn't know who she was.

Then why pull somebody off the street he didn't plan to trade for cash? It wouldn't wash either way. And what about the guy I'd taken out. Rudy's backup, or was there another angle to all this? Too many questions. It was time to dig up some answers.

I DIDN'T WANT to waste time going back for my car, so I took a cab across the Ala Wai canal and down Kapiolani. Senator King could afford it. I got out under a weak neon-script sign that said Blue Lei, asked the driver to wait, and went inside.

There are several hundred Korean bars scattered throughout Honolulu, all on the same order. Small, dark, catering almost exclusively to married Oriental men, since custom has it that the husband is allowed out at least one night a week to rowdy around.

The hostesses are mostly Korean or Japanese, very persuasive, who make their living off

commissions from watered-down drinks which they down at an astounding rate. A lot of the bars are backed by mob money.

The Blue Lei was dark and cozy. It smelled of liquor, pot and dried sweat. I stood by the door, letting my eyes adjust. The only lighting consisted of two twenty-watt bulbs behind the bar and half a dozen red lamps scattered around the room.

A shadowy figure came up, took my arm and breathed, "Come sit down."

I followed her to a booth. "Get yourself a drink," I said, "and tell the bartender Jim Northlake wants to see Fuji."

By the time she got back my night vision was working well enough to show me I wasn't being hustled by any movie star. Her perfume was cheap and powerful. It clashed with the kimchee on her breath.

"It'll be a few minutes," she said hopefully.

I sat firmly on the edge of the seat, forcing her to sit across from me. There was no scintillating conversation. She left abruptly when a hulking shadow came up to the booth and resolved into Fuji Kaneshiro. The big Hawaiian sat down carefully, wedging his gut into the narrow space.

"Hello, Fuji. Long time, no see."

"What, Mr. Northlake?"

He didn't seem cheered to see me. Well, he had no cause to be.

It was pay-up time.

I said, "I've had a miserable night so far, Fuji. I'm tired, confused and half drowned. I need some answers pronto."

He nodded unhappily.

"There's a lady missing, a wealthy lady. I saw the grab. Your boss' car and — I think — his muscle. What's going down?"

"Man, all I do is run this joint."

"The woman is a client," I continued. "I want HPD kept out of this to avoid publicity. Rumor has it Lester is the big cog in the West Coast snow machine. None of my affair. But I'm damned if I can see why he would jeopardize his operation by staging this kidnapping. Enlighten me."

Fuji lit a cigarette with shaking hands and wheezed in a lungful of smoke. "Hey, brother. If it gets back you know I'm dead."

"It won't. I've kept my lip buttoned for four years when a single name would have landed your lard ass in Halawa jail. Why would I drop you now?"

"Okay, okay. All I know is — this ain't the first time. And it's not your normal snatch. The boss don't keep 'em long and once they're let go they don't ever press charges. Maybe something to do with the big operation. I don't know."

I had a flash. "Couriers?"

He shrugged, scared.

"Where is she?"

He hesitated a long time. Finally gave me the address of a small, rundown hotel in Chinatown. His chins trembled. I paid for the girl's drink and left.

NORTH HOTEL STREET is the undisputed center of vice in the islands. It's not large in area, ten or twelve square blocks in the heart of Chinatown, but that territory is some of the roughest west of San Francisco. A stone's throw from the harbor.

It was originally frequented by seamen from the whalers and merchantmen around the turn of the century. Most of the buildings haven't changed much since, except now their facades are decorated with neon touting the porno shops, straight and gay bars, pool rooms and massage parlors.

HPD patrols it heavily at night, tolerating anything short of a major disturbance. They don't want to upset the balance and have the cancer spread to the rest of their tourist paradise.

I jumped out of the taxi at the corner of Maunakea and Hotel and walked north. In spite of the rain, business as usual went on from doorways and beneath gaudy umbrellas. Hard-eyed hookers in towering coiffures and micro-minis regaled me with offers of endless orgasmic delights. A few of them were suspiciously good baritones.

The buildings got older and grimier. There was a sweet, mild

stink of decay in the wet air, underlying more prosaic city odors. I turned off into an alley, past a curtained gypsy stand, where a young-old woman offered to read my fortune. Her husband or boyfriend was somewhere in the shadows, waiting to clout me and lift my wallet if I accepted.

At the end of the alley, a rusted flight of fire stairs hung from a second story landing. I went up quietly. The door was weather-worn and locked. It yielded to a handy little tool which, closed, could pass for a Swiss pocket knife. I slipped inside and eased the door shut.

I moved quickly down a long shadowy hallway that reeked of rotting wood and mildew and other unpleasantness. Finding the right door was no problem. I stopped at the one with the screams echoing behind it.

The ancient jamp splintered apart as I kicked the door open and stepped into the room beyond. It wasn't much of a room. A bed, a bureau, some chairs and too many mirrors.

Amanda King lay huddled in the middle of the double bed, more or less undressed. There was blood on her mouth and her eyes were wide and staring. Tears had left deep tracks in her make-up. Rudy stood to one side wearing only a pair of pants. His torso and arms were muscle-gnarled. At the end of the bed was a skinny little creep with a tripod-mounted Nikon. Picture time.

Rudy glared at me savagely. The creep froze. Amanda King stared.

"Who the hell are you?" the beachboy said finally, realizing I didn't have a gun or badge.

"The guy who's gonna kick your ass up between your shoulder blades," I said, just to get his adrenalin flowing.

It was like throwing raw meat in front of a tiger. He charged across the room. I smashed Rudy's left instep as he came at me, sidestepped, and dislocated his shoulder as he went on by. He fetched up in the corner with a terrific crash and began to moan.

"*The film!*" I yelled at the creep.

He fumbled around with his camera. I glanced at the senator's wife. She was watching me with a strange expression.

The little guy was just handing me the film when, like some lousy Grade-B movie, the wracked-up door shuddered open and there stood a man with a big .38 in his fist. Lester Sakata was a tall, thin Japanese-American, with a Charles Bronson haircut and mustache. He carried a small black bag in his left hand and the pistol in his right.

"What in Christ's name is going on?" he snapped, trying to look everywhere at once. "*Northlake!* Stay right there!"

I half-raised my hands and edged a little towards him.

Sakata glared at Rudy huddled in the corner and shook his head. "You stuck your nose in my business once and walked away, Northlake. Don't plan on it happening again."

"Calm down, Lester." I wasn't too scared. My pulse jumped to about 130 and my palms felt like I was carrying ice-cubes. "You're not about to ruin this sordid little set-up by wasting me."

He laughed — sort of. "I don't know how you stumbled into this, gumshoe, but you don't have the slightest idea what's going on. So you haven't told anybody. They find your body washed up in Haunamma Bay, what's going to connect you with me?"

"That bag you've got is full of heroin, isn't it?" I said casually, trying to make it sound like I had the whole thing figured out. "And this lady's going to carry it to L.A. for you, right?"

It was supposed to make him curious about how much more I knew. Instead it made him mad. He said, "Goodbye, you bastard," between clenched teeth and raised the gun.

He was too far away for me to reach before he fired. I was worm-meat.

Suddenly, like a steel spring uncoiling, Amanda King came off the bed. She drop-kicked the photographer, sending his ass over tripod.

Sakata hesitated in surprise and we hit him together. I knocked the gun aside and she smacked her palms over his ears hard enough to rupture both eardrums. The dynamic duo. Sakata shrieked and slid to the floor, holding his head.

I put the gun on safety and stared at the half-naked woman who, I finally realized, was no senator's wife. She grinned, probably at my drop-jaw expression.

"Sarah Phillifent, Mr. Northlake. Bureau of Narcotics. Would you do the honors of calling the police while I repair what's left of my clothing?"

DURING LULLS in the investigative confusion that followed, and between the statements three different detectives wanted from me, Ms. Phillifent filled me in. Lester Sakata was in fact the main supplier of West Coast heroin from the islands. And he had come up with a new wrinkle for getting it onto the mainland.

"Lonely tourist women with wealth and some social status are constantly traveling back and forth from Honolulu to the coast," she explained. Her face was younger without the heavy makeup and the harsh, alcohol-deepened voice had modulated.

"They come here looking for a little exotic romance. Perfect set-ups for Sakata's operation because, for various reasons, they can't afford a scandal. Men like Rudy arrange to meet them, escort them long enough to make certain

they're vulnerable, then — *zing!* — the pickup.

"After an hour of degradation in this room, plus the threats and the pictures, the victims are only too willing to carry in a small brown package. One time only. Sakata is clever about that. The whole plan is based on the couriers being amateurs, innocents.

"They carry the stuff to L.A. or San Francisco, the drop is made in the airport parking lot, and that's it. Sakata never bothers them again, but holds the pictures to make certain they keep quiet. So far all of them have, except one.

"She was involved in a freeway accident and spent four days in intensive care before she died. During that time she managed to tell one of our people all she knew. Of course she had no names but it was a start."

Later on Ms. Phillifent continued, "We've been running this decoy routine for three weeks now, substituting our female agents for likely candidates. We found out about the senator's wife's little escapades through another agency, never mind who.

"She was intercepted at the L.A. airport yesterday afternoon, and I took her place. I made the contact all right, and after that everything went haywire. Somewhere in this city there's a backup man who was supposed to tail the whole operation and bail me out before things got too rough."

"I'm responsible for your bumps and bruises," I admitted. "When I jumped into the middle of this I didn't have a scorecard. What's the penalty for assaulting a federal agent?"

"It was our blunder. We hadn't counted on the senator hiring a private eye. He's never shown much concern over his wife's jaunts before, but then we forgot about the primaries." She sighed and rubbed an ugly bruise on her upper arm.

"That Rudy is a sadistic s.o.b. I think things were about to get extremely nasty — then you broke down the door. Now that *really* confused things. I didn't know who you were." She shook her head ruefully. "Not a very impressive performance, I'm afraid."

"Ms. Phillifent," I said, "you saved my life. That's impressive as hell. Can I buy you a drink sometime?"

She laughed. "If I'm still in town tomorrow night."

I gave her my number and we shook on it. She left and, gradually, the boys from HPD began to wind things up.

I hung around for a while, thinking about how close I'd come to dying. My knees were still shaky and the old stomach felt like five days on a rough ocean.

When I finally left it was raining again. Even the hookers had given it up. No taxis. I walked for blocks, got soaked to the skin and didn't give a damn.

Those Were The Days

by

RONALD POMEROY

Hoot and Sue were an ideal couple. But something happened along the way that made them deadly enemies.

HOOT WAS HANDSOME. There in one short stabbing Hemingway sentence you have Hoot Norwood.

More could be added by listening over a Martini to his heroic exclamations regarding the sacred measurements of certain shapely rumps, mainly those attached to the wives of his closest friends.

Yes, it was that brand of handsomeness, the malignant variety.

Besides that, there was the pipe. A simple, thin-stemmed job that required frequent retorching. Especially when his wife Sue would approach him suspiciously with queries like, "Where have you been, Hoot? Isn't it a little late to be getting home?" He would reply with a pillar of smoke,

too weak to hold up the unrehearsed lie.

When they first met, Sue hadn't minded the pipe at all. In fact, she considered its aroma rather romantic. But then, in those days, wasn't everything romantic about the top pass receiver at Amherst, the most sought-after superstar in town?

Sue nestled her feet up under her, sinking a little deeper into the early American style couch, her gaze welded vacantly on the blue-orange flames licking their way up and around the logs in the den fireplace. The fire was playing with the light, creating a kind of dance between the room's shadows and the reading lamp.

She could see images stepping out of the past, things like school football games, necking at drive-in theaters, dreamy songs and snuggled-up-close dancing. She nearly laughed thinking of her tight plaid skirts and the white shoes that were forever being scuffed. She touched her chestnut hair, remembering how it used to bounce haughtily off her shoulders as she swung on by the football field.

All those accidental meetings with a surprised open mouth, then tossing half the night wondering if she had overacted or if her undersized blouses were too obvious. Sue had pulled out all the stops and was beginning to think Hoot would never ask her for a date. But he did, and after that things moved like a bullet-pass on third down.

They were married in mid-autumn, on one of those Saturdays when everyone rakes leaves and washes the car. The church was white clapboard and smelled of a recent coating of fresh paint. Hoot's buddies chalked up the convertible with what Sue exclaimed just had to be nasty observations, not at all amusing. Hoot was commanded to pull into the first car wash they came to.

A log crackled in the fire, causing Shane, the Irish setter, to murmur in his dream and flutter an ear from the dark red ball he was curled up in. It had been exactly thirty minutes since she and the man submerged in the easy chair had spoken. She knew it was that long because that's how long a pipe bowl lasted, and it was now getting a refill.

Sue wondered if she should say something. He had been nursing a dreadful hangover all day, barely picking at the grand meatloaf she had prepared for dinner.

"Hoot," she said. The word pierced the stillness like a speckled trout breaking the surface of a balmy lake. "Whatever became of the yellow Chevy, the one we used on our honeymoon?"

The man finished filling the pipe, then answered without removing his eyes from the latest issue of *Field and Stream* "My pal, Billy Mau, bought it." His words spaced between draws on

the pipe. "A hundred and ninety bucks. We had agreed on two hundred, but the cheap bastard screwed me out of ten."

"Really, Hoot, I do wish you would try and curb your language. If you could have heard yourself at Peg's last night!"

"You know, that sonofabitch Mau drove that car clear to California and back on his own honeymoon, then sold it for two fifty." The pipe was banged down hard on the metal ashtray, sending Shane scooting away with his belly low to the floor.

"You never were much of a businessman. Our first home on Ravenswood, you practically gave it away."

"And who was the one forever complaining? The drafty windows, the poor heating furnace, the cellar flooded every time we had a heavy rain?"

Sue threw her head back against the sofa with a sigh. "If you hadn't spent all your time on a bar stool, or out fishing or hunting with your drunken buddies, those problems could have been solved."

Hoot flung aside the magazine and veered for the bar.

"More booze! I would have thought last night's drunk would hold you for a while."

Hoot didn't answer as he poured a drink, letting the bourbon roll gently over the ice cubes, then stirring it with a finger.

"Want to watch *All In The Family?*" asked Sue, studying the *TV Guide.*

"I would prefer making love," chirped Hoot. "Think if we hurry, darling, we can space it between the commercials?"

"Think you could manage to stay sober long enough, darling?" fired back Sue.

Hoot giggled, the bourbon already doing its job.

"OH, shut *up!*" snarled Sue.

"'Shut *up*'? Really, my love, is that any way to address your lover, your protector? Just a vulgar, 'shut *up!*'?"

Sue whipped her eyes around, riveting into his. "Why don't you go out and sleep with your women again?"

A sardonic grin spread to Hoot's lips as he refilled his glass, this time recklessly spilling whiskey on the formica bar top. "I wasn't going to bring this up, Sue, but remember all those boils I used to get? Well, it wasn't the pizza. Since we bought twin beds, I haven't had a one. It was bedding with you that caused all those boils, not pizza.

He burst into howls of laughter as Shane slipped into a shadowed corner. "Here's to no more boils," toasted Hoot.

The marriage was over. Sue had known that for months. Reverend Crawford had talked to them both, tirelessly, doing all he could. They had even moved to this new home thinking that would help. Now she realized with a sober finality the end was near.

Guys like us, we had it made, sang TV's Carroll O'Connor.

Where had all that warm love gone? The kissing till their lips grew sore? A love from the Bible, friends called it.

Didn't need a welfare state, everybody pulled his weight.

"Those sure were the days, all right." Sue joined in with lamenting eyes.

The cracking of a rifle bolt absorbed the clever jokes emanating from the Bunker household. Failing to intimidate her verbally, Sue now comprehended the shotgun sounds she was so familiar with: the falling shell into the open breach, the clicking of the safety to the *off* position.

She felt like saying, "Go ahead and shoot, if that's what it will take to make you feel better." Instead, she offered life. "We could have another child — I'm young enough. We could do that, Hoot."

The shotgun was laid down on the bar and the half-empty bottle reached for in the same motion. "Splendid idea. While we're at it, let's get a new TV set. And that bush of yours, the one I drove over with the car last week — we'll get a new one of those. What else do we need? Can you think of anything?"

"Edith," demanded Archie, "bring me a beer, you dingbat."

"The TV stinks," said Hoot, cradling the bourbon to his chest. "I'm going up to bed," he added, swaying in a slow circle.

Then he said with a whiskey smirk to his face, "I wouldn't want another kid by you. With those three months you spent in that mental hospital, it probably would turn out to be a dingbat."

Sue listened to the laborious steps climbing the stairs, the bottle scraping against the wall. The closing door, and the trace of his footsteps over the ceiling, terminating in a lifeless fall onto the bed.

Sheepishly, almost as if it were all his fault, Shane returned to Sue's feet, peering up with a tilted head and a quizzically sad pair of eyes. She watched the television, but didn't see it. The dog whimpered, she didn't hear. The fire had slowed a bit; she brought it to life, using the heavy brass poker.

After that, she straightened the slip covers and turned off the TV. Sue's movements became precise, as if she had just now come to an important decision. She moved briskly to the refrigerator behind the bar. A jar with several olives left — a bottle of club soda, a carton of milk.

She removed the milk and poured what she estimated to be a cupful into a pan. She had been insistent about having the old gas range installed down here in the den. It saved a lot of running up and downstairs.

Soon the milk was simmering. She used one of the ceramic cups she had made at the mental home.

Then she blew out the pilot light and turned the gas jets back on to the *high* position.

Sue had seen Joan Crawford do it this way on the late show. Little did she think then how useful that movie would be to her. The escaping gas made a hissing whistle, like air leaving an auto tire. She glanced around the room as she sipped her milk. Such a lovely home, the kind they had always dreamed of having. What a pity!

Once the gas filled the den, the fireplace would set it off. The thought of that made Sue feel dismayed, a sudden emptiness in her stomach. She wished for something sweet, but there wasn't a thing in the house. How about that convenience store up on the main highway? The walk would do her good.

Shane led the way, his tail swishing excitedly. The night air was a trifle snappy. However, she decided not to wear a coat. A sweater would do. There was a moon hanging like a big silver Christmas tree ornament. The dog ran on ahead, stopping at every tree to sniffle in circles, then racing on again.

A large car turned the corner, its light beams spearing Sue in their cones. She moved cautiously to the shoulder. The driver courteously slowed his vehicle as he passed. Why hadn't the other driver been as careful that fatal afternoon two years ago? Why had she thoughtlessly gabbed to a neighbor while their son Kenny wandered out into the street?

The man behind the wheel never saw him. Then there was just that thin stream of sweet blood, inching its way toward the curb. A policeman arrived and placed a blanket over the doll-like body. Still there was that sweetish scent of child's blood on the hot pavement. So many flowers came — rows and rows of flowers.

The explosion sent a shiver through the earth and the sky flashed daylight for an instant like a camera flashbulb. Sue's neck and shoulders lurched together. She wanted to pray, but couldn't. Instead she felt happy thinking about the cookies. What kind should she get?

Hoot used to like fig bars, but she wouldn't be buying that kind again. Come to think of it, Hoot didn't care for sweets since the accident. But then, they say people who drink a lot don't like sweets. And Hoot sure did drink a lot after he ran down and killed Kenny.

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GET RICH QUICK

All Mrs. Smithson wanted Train to do was to find the whereabouts of her missing son. But when he reached the end of the sordid trail, it was to learn that his client's life was in big danger.

SHE CAME IN THURSDAY evening between the long sand spit and the breakwater, passed along the shadowed base of Morro Rock and turned south down Morro Bay harbor. I was watching her through glasses from a public wharf in front of the Pacific Gas & Electric power plant. She was called the *Jenny B* now, but was born the *Corinthian II.* She had been swiped from Mrs. Harry V. Smithson, of Mill Valley and Sausalito, 21 months ago. By her son, Mrs. Smithson had told me.

The *Jenny B* ghosted slowly down the harbor to her mooring can, going less, it seemed to my landsman's eye, than the legal limit of 5 miles an hour. A very cautious boat. The last golden hues of twilight held her in silhouette and she looked gentle and harmless at that speed — an Adamson-Rawlins cruiser, the old gentleman had told me, one of 6 or 7 still on the Pacific Coast.

The old gentleman was Captain Alfred Hawes, USN, retired, friend, protector and possibly

unwed consort to Mrs. Smithson. "Thirty-eight feet at the water line, Train," he had told me Monday afternoon, "and twenty-two knots of speed in her, given a bit of sea room. A good vessel."

I had gone aboard the *Jenny B* Tuesday night around 10 o'clock, clandestinely. I had borrowed a skiff onshore and rowed out to her mooring can on dead still water. She was battened down, as Hawes would put it, but I got in through a wheel-house window, left partly open for ventilation.

The first thing I did was check the engine number and, when it matched the one given me by Mrs. Smithson, I ceased being a criminal and became the owner's agent. It made me feel at home. She was the *Corinthian* for sure and she was loaded for bear, or maybe shark.

She had radar, a fish-finding sonar rig, a lot of fancy radio equipment and a small arsenal — two 30-30 rifles, a shotgun and a Colt .45 automatic all neatly oiled and racked. But the rest of her was scruffy.

She smelled of fish and something vaguely feminine, perfume maybe, or powder.

Below, forward of the engine room, in what Hawes would probably call the chain locker, was a steel strong-box, padlocked and chained to an eye-bolt in one of the boat's ribs. It was heavy and gave you the impression of containing something valuable, like money, and it would be hard to get out of there unless you had the key. It had been under a tarp when I found it and I put the tarp back.

The owner's cabin was fairly neat, the double-bunk bed made up, but the folded back sheet and the pillow cases were gray and long over-due for a wash. In the medicine chest of the head there was a bottle of Midol tablets, a bottle of aspirin, 3 toothbrushes, a tube of paste and a box of Tampax. The head was almost clean, about like one you'd find in a well-run but busy gas station.

But the galley aft of the head was a mess of unwashed pots, pans, dishes and cutlery, plus two dry dirty towels hanging from a hook. The main cabin was similarly unkempt, with only one of the four bunks looking slept in, the rest used as storage bins for fishing gear, boxes, blankets, unwashed laundry, etc.

On one of the bunks, two unopened gallon jugs of red wine were nestled down like favored twins. Captain Hawes, still Annapolis straight and trim, would have been appalled.

Topside, aft of the cabin, was a live-bait tank half full of water with a dozen or so dead shiners floating on the surface. Adjoining it, one on each side, were two large lidded oaken boxes that together, I thought, would hold a lot of fish. The *Jenny B* was a working boat — not a commercial fisherman, not a sport fisherman, but something else again, a puzzle. I had expected to find her fitted out for different work.

Captain Hawes had seen her last Sunday afternoon, moored to her can in the bay. He and a retired naval friend he had been visiting in Morro Bay were eating fish in Bob's restaurant overlooking the bay, and Hawes had recognized her instantly, despite certain changes that had been made.

"They've painted her gray," he told me Monday in Mrs. Smithson's Mill Valley home, "and added a sophisticated looking radio antenna and some boxes of some sort on the aft deck, but she's the *Corinthian*, Train, beyond a doubt."

"And you want me to confirm that."

"Yes," Mrs. Smithson answered, "and find my son, William, Mr. Train."

Behind the wicker chair in which Mrs. Smithson was seated, Hawes, his hand fondly, protectively, on her right shoulder, raised a skeptical brow. "We'd

like to think he's still with the boat," he said, "but it's been nearly two years. I saw no one aboard yesterday."

He was more aware of the probabilities than Mrs. Smithson, better prepared to face them. Boat thefts were increasing all over the country, and if the owner happened to be aboard when the theft took place, he usually went with the deal. Most of the stolen vessels end up in the drug trade, and people in that business kill as easily as they die. Hawes seemed to sense that, I thought, but didn't want Mrs. Smithson to. The thing between them, the love, was a joy to see — an aging knight and his lady.

We were on the patio of her home, overlooking the valley. I had been called out that morning by Hawes, who had gotten my name from a mutual acquaintance, and I was in a world alien to my usual haunts.

It wasn't the obvious wealth — most of my clients have money — it was a sense of values, lost elsewhere, but alive here, even enshrined, a sense of fair play, of duty, of honor, the old things. It made me uncomfortable. It seemed too fragile a thing to survive. The two of them were doomed, I thought, along with all they held dear. The missing boy was the harbinger of that doom, if not its instrument.

They wanted me to find him, that was all — find him and tell them when I had. They'd take it from there. They hadn't reported him missing 21 months ago, or the boat stolen. It was a family matter and should be kept that way.

Mrs. Smithson thought her son was "sorting himself out" and would return in due time, a prodigal maybe, but sound of blood and breed. It was an article of faith — he would return. But in the meantime, since they had finally located the boat, she wanted to know he was alive and well.

Hawes, on the other hand, had a different view of the matter. After the meeting on the patio, he walked me through the house and out to my car.

"I don't care much if he's alive or dead," he told me. "The boy's a rotter, Train, through and through. He's been stealing from his mother — money, jewels, anything he could lay his hands on — since he was ten. An only child is a bad bet, particularly without a father most of his life. I'm a friend, Train, in case you've been wondering, but a good one, a good one —"

He opened the driver's door of my Dart, a service he performed without a trace of condescension. "I doubt now the wisdom of having told her I saw the boat yesterday," he said, "but it's the first word we've had and she deserves to know the facts.

"She's a thoroughbred, she can handle it, whatever it is. But above all, discretion, Train, discretion.

Report directly to us. If police action is indicated, let us make the decision to employ it. You understand?"

"Sure," I said.

He gave me his hand and I felt the old bones give under the discreet pressure of mine. He was seventyish, I judged, five or six years older than Mrs. Smithson. William, now 22, had been a late child and that's not always a good bet, either. I had a three-year-old snapshot of him and his general description.

I had a snapshot and a technical description of the boat, I had Mrs. Smithson's unlisted phone number, and I had a bad feeling about the whole thing. These people were from another age and William, whatever else he was, a man of his own time. It was inevitable that he war upon them. I had a premonition. I said as I drove away, "Protect yourself at all times, Captain."

TUESDAY MORNING I left San Francisco and arrived in Morro Bay that afternoon. I got a motel room overlooking the bay and had an early dinner at Bob's, as recommended by Hawes. The *Corinthian* was right where he had told me it would be, about a hundred yards offshore, one of many in a long random pattern extending south down the sheltered waters of the bay. There was no one aboard her, no dinghy shipped on deck or trailing off the stern — and that night at ten I made my inspection.

The next morning I was up at 6:30, but the *Corinthian*, now the *Jenny B.*, was gone and she didn't get back until Thursday evening. There were two people aboard. After they had moored the boat I could see them clearly moving about on deck, very businesslike. In less than a half-hour they came ashore in an inflatable rubber dinghy, making dock 40 feet from where I stood. They could have seen me if they'd looked, but they didn't look.

They unloaded four heavy-looking gunny sacks from the dinghy and took them up to street level and put them in the back of an ancient Dodge pick-up parked alongside an abandoned-looking warehouse. Then they lashed the dinghy on top of the sacks, got in the truck and took off.

I got into my Dart and followed them through town to the Highway I interchange and trailed them 17 miles south to San Luis Obispo, going less than 50 miles an hour. Aboard the truck as aboard the boat, they moved with caution.

I followed them onto the Cal Poly campus in San Luis and then, intricately and slowly, to the student union building, which at eight-thirty was still open. They parked there and the one on the passenger side got out and walked rapidly into the building.

I followed and, inside, got my first good look at him. But it wasn't a him, it was a her, a dark-

haired, dark-eyed girl with a dark-blue wool stocking cap on her head. She went directly to the bulletin board and pinned a notice there. She seemed in a hurry and oblivious to me or anyone else in the still fairly crowded place.

The notice read, *Fresh red snapper at Filio's.*

I followed her back outside, got in the Dart, then followed the Dodge off campus onto a broad busy street and then west about a half-mile to a cluster of fast-food outlets, one of which was called, in red neon script, *Filio's — Fish & Chips*. The Dodge pulled around behind the building and I drifted past a hundred yards or so, parked, got out and walked back.

Filio's was a middle-sized place that looked as though it had grown from something a lot smaller. It didn't have the crisp new look of a Shakey's or McDonald's, but it was just as busy — with a mixed crowd of townspeople and students — and had a lot of ways to serve you.

Outside on the right were a dozen or so picnic tables under a canopy, about half of them occupied. Inside a half-dozen booths and a counter and, on the left outside wall, a take-out window.

The Dodge was parked at the rear of the building and I saw the girl and the man with her — not William, I could tell under the good lighting — unload the dinghy and the four gunny-sacks and take them all in through the service entrance. Inside, maybe, they deflated the dinghy, but it looked like an awkward piece of work to me.

It was nine o'clock and I hadn't eaten since lunch. I went in and sat at the counter and ordered the standard $2.95 combination plate, usually a safe bet in a fish shop.

I dawdled over it. I picked up a San Francisco *Chronicle* someone had left on the counter and in the next hour and a half read every word of it. I was looking for William, but if he was alive and if he was there, he didn't show himself.

I saw the dark-haired girl almost constantly through the service portal to the kitchen. She had taken off her stocking cap and sea jacket and spent most of the time on a high-legged stool, chain smoking and watching the cooks. With her hair loose and flowing, she was a handsome girl.

Her shipmate appeared now and again from a closed room to the left of the kitchen, spoke a few words with her, and went back again. He was about William's height, five-eleven, and his dark hair could have been dyed, but he had a fighter's square-jawed, pug-nosed face, and William, aside from being blond, had a thin, high-cheekboned face like his mother's.

About ten o'clock, business fell off sharply and I was the single customer inside the building for quite a while. But then, a little later, trade picked up again, a few

people coming inside, but most of them lining up outside at the take-out window. I couldn't see the window from where I was, but I could see the line and the concentration of business there seemed odd to me.

I asked the counter girl where the men's room was and she pointed outside. I told her to open me a beer and went out and around the building to the back, passing the take-out window where William was. William, with a Jesu Cristo beard and hair down to his shoulders. In the snapshot I had of him his hair was the way his mother probably preferred it — short. But it was William all right.

Back inside, I drank my beer and did some mental arithmetic. I had been working since Tuesday morning. If I reported back at around noon tomorrow, Friday, I'd have three and a half days coming at two hundred per, say seven hundred bucks, plus expenses. Not bad for a pleasant drive down the coast.

I had done what I was hired to do, confirm the boat and find the missing son. But, after 19 years on the S.F. police force and nearly three on my own, I couldn't just cut and run.

That take-out line bothered me and, on reflection, something else bothered me now. Red snapper appeared nowhere on the menu and no one had ordered it in my hearing in all the time I'd been there. And something else — the take-out line, still growing outside the window, was composed strictly of students.

I paid my tab, went outside and walked slowly toward my car. Immediately to the left of Filio's there was about twenty feet of asphalted parking space, then a battered wooden fence separating Filio's from an old house that had resisted the wave of modern progress.

I continued on to the Dart, got my binoculars from the trunk and returned to the gravel driveway that went up the left flank of the old house. There was a light on in the front window, unmistakably tinged with TV blue.

I went up the drive and was greeted alongside the back porch by a large dark dog. He growled. I said something soothing and his tail wagged. I advanced. He laid his head against my knee like a cat and I rubbed his ears. I went across the back yard to the fence, followed by the dog, who wanted more.

Through the glasses, I could see William twice as big as life. He was working fast and hard. The ends of the hair over his forehead were drawn together into dark darts of sweat. The customer line had grown, 15 persons long now, but moving almost at a walk. All students.

I watched for ten minutes and saw amounts of money go through that window hugely incommensurate with the amounts of fish or

change coming back. He was selling something more than food — he was selling dope. The arrangement of the window was such that each transaction was private.

The person next in line couldn't see what was going on but I, from my position in a line of sight slightly above and to the left of the window, clearly could. Fifty dollars seemed to be the usual amount going in and a white carry-away box the standard item coming out. Red snapper was the code word for something other than fish.

I sighed and turned away and sat down on a stump and took the dog's head in my lap. Ten years ago, the sight would have made me damn near swoon with rage, but I'm no longer surprised or even much disturbed by the variety of ways we've got to do each other in for money.

That was a fast-death outlet William was running. And we were letting him, we the people. The people of this town, of all towns, everywhere, we're letting this happen. Fifty dollars for a box full of misery served right out there under the bright lights on the widest street in town! Such is the neon-lit moral climate we've built for ourselves.

Ten years ago I would have wanted to storm that place all by myself, lay it waste in righteous wrath. Now I sat and rubbed a dog's ears. Simple crime a simple man can deal with — moral cli-

mates are for savants and social engineers and I've learned to leave all that to them — and them in turn to Heaven.

I GOT UP AND put the glasses once again on William's window, telling myself I still had to *prove* it was him and not just a look-alike. It was a rationalization. The old rage lingered on, like a bubble of gas you can't quite belch away. Rubbing the dog's ears had soothed him, not me.

The line had remained constant, but was still moving fast. As one left another came. More than a thousand dollars had gone through that window, maybe nearing two by now. In a half hour. How to get rich quick.

I swung the glasses left to the truck, still parked at the rear of the building. What they did, I thought, was pick up the junk at sea, probably at night, probably from a boat coming up from Mexico. They'd set the rendezvous by radio, or maybe by mail or telephone ashore.

It didn't matter, that part would be easy, and the meet no problem either. Oh God, I thought in paraphrase, Your sea is so big and our Coast Guard vessels so few. The *Jenny B.* could range as far as need be.

Then they'd fish. They'd fill their two oaken holds and if somebody asked, they could claim righteously that they had a contract to supply Filio's, the well-known fish house in San Luis Obispo. Red snapper for horse, maybe — rock bass for coke — ling cod for something else.

The dope trade up and down this stretch of coast had been growing like a cancer the past few years. According to the latest reports I'd read, the Mafia wasn't yet involved. It was being run by local entrepeneurs, individuals in the early stages, then organizations of individuals, better known as mobs, each eager to control the most profitable business ever invented by ingenious man, to die for it, if need be, as though for a noble cause.

William and his friends had a piece of that lucrative action, maybe even a monopoly on the local college trade, some 15,000 prosperous prospects, a large piece of the pie.

I dropped the glasses, bilious again with the old disgust. At such moments, I'm glad I have no kids and never will. No stake but my own in the doubtful future . . .

She was looking back at me. The girl, standing by the driver's side of the Dodge, a cigaret dangling from the corner of her mouth, was looking back at me. We gazed at each other across 35 feet of well-lit air and then I turned and went back to the Dart at a trot, the dog following me to the bottom of the driveway.

SHE HAD SEEN ME, but not my car — unless she had spotted it on

the way down from Morro Bay or at the campus stop. But I doubted that. I sat in the Dart for two or three minutes, enjoying a sense of excitement. In a way, you like the other side to know you're in the game. It sharpens your wits — more, you hope, than it sharpens theirs.

I turned the Dart around and parked on the other side of the street in a position to watch both car entrances to Filio's lot. They closed at 11:30, the sign inside had told me. It was eleven o'clock now and business was slowing to a crawl, the take-out line down to six or seven, only one booth occupied inside.

I couldn't see the picnic tables out back, but it was cold enough now to discourage eating al fresco, a damp mist rolling in from the sea a few miles away. Two cars drove out. I was waiting for the Dodge, but was thinking they possibly also had a car they could leave in.

The take-out line dwindled to nothing in a matter of minutes and the light went out over the window. Two more cars left, coming out from behind and turning left toward the heart of town. San Luis Obispo, thirty thousand or so residents, half that many students, a volatile mix. At 11:15 the booth occupants left, got in their car and drove away.

I selected a card from my wallet, got out of the Dart and went across the street into the building. The graying blonde woman who had waited on me before came out from the kitchen and approached me at the counter with a smile. I showed her the card.

"I'm Sam Train," I said. "I represent the insurers of these premises. I'd like to see the owner."

The woman glanced at the card without reading it, the way most of them do. "Phillipa's gone," she said.

"Phillipa?"

"Miss Corso. She owns the place."

"The dark-haired girl?"

"Yessir."

"Have the cooks gone — the man who handles the take-out win dow? William —?"

"Williams? Yessir."

"Williams?"

"Yessir, Smitty Williams, he's the take-out man."

"And the other — dark-haired, square jawed?"

"Pete Weston. He catches the fish, he and Phil, or sometimes Smitty. We serve nothing here but fresh-caught fish, Mr. Train."

"*Nothing?*"

"Well — I mean, the fish is always fresh caught. You seemed to enjoy yours tonight." She said it with a touch of defiant pride, and I took a guess.

"You manage the place for Miss Corso?"

"Yessir, since she inherited it three years now. Ms. Corso."

"Her folks died?"

think it was. I wanted to set it up for them and for the cops. I wanted these people put away.

"When's your next pick-up?" I said.

"Her father died three years ago, her mother a long time before that. But what has this got to do —?"

"Where does Ms. Corso live?"

"I don't know, but —"

"How about her phone number?"

"It's unlisted. Let me see that card of yours again, please." She stepped a foot away from the counter, arms akimbo.

"Relax," I said. The cook who had been cleaning up in the kitchen looked inquiringly through the serving port. Trouble, I suppose, was not unknown to them at this hour of the night.

"When Ms. Corso comes in in the morning," I said, "Tell her —"

"I doubt that she will. She never comes in before night — and sometimes not then."

"Tell her some changes will have to be made. Tell her it's very important, tell her a *big* change will have to be made. Tell her I'll see her again soon."

Playing the game, I thought outside. Throw a big fat one across the plate and see if they swing at it. What else could I do? If I were a cop in this town, I'd work on this joint until I nailed them, the old rage driving me on. But I wasn't a cop in this town, and even if I were, I knew how *that* would go.

After three years of nit-picking litigation, they'd be acquitted, not quite enough *hard* evidence, not caught actually shoving the stuff into some poor fool's arm, their lawyer a hundred thousand dollars richer, back in business again. What else could I do?

There was a phone booth on the corner of Filio's lot. I went there and looked in the book. There was no Phillipa Corso listed, no Petė Weston and no Smitty Williams. Smitty Williams — William Smithson is now Smitty Williams. It fit the pattern — mostly they segue into a new name, keeping elements of the old. Especially the first time. It's as though they're not quite sure the new man is all that different from the old.

For Mrs. Smithson and Captain Hawes it would be enough. They'd accept it as fact that I'd found the boy and pay me. But I like to deliver well-rounded packages to my better-class clients. I had no address on the missing son and told myself I should have.

I wouldn't blow the whistle on him, but I wanted to tell my clients, "This is what he calls himself and this is where he lives."

I went back north on Highway I to Morro Bay and circled back on the harbor road to where they had parked the truck before. There was nothing there, which was good, but the *Jenny B.* was there

where she belonged, and that was good, too. It was the only address I had on them and I didn't want it to move away on me. Not yet, anyway.

I went back to my motel room, set my alarm and went to sleep. At six the next morning, when I got up, the *Jenny B.* was still there, barely discernible through a thin haze in the pre-dawn light. It was cold.

I found a coffee shop open on the harbor road and after breakfast ordered a big container of coffee and a couple of ham sandwiches to go. Then I went scouting along the waterfront for someone with a skiff and was lucky enough to find an old man just shoving out in the water.

"Where are you going?" I said.

He dropped his oars. "Oystering." He pointed across the harbor to the long spit of sand that divides it from the sea. "Over there."

"Drop me off at that boat," I said, pointing myself. "Over there. Five bucks," I added.

"Get in," he said.

I asked him when he was coming back and he said middle of the afternoon probably, and I asked him to stop by the *Jenny B.* then and, if I was still there, he could make another five. He said he'd like that. We were alone in the misty world.

I got in through the same wheelhouse window that I had on Tuesday night and went below right

away. Nothing had changed except that the galley had been cleaned. With less competition, the smell of perfume was stronger in the trapped air.

I made myself comfortable on the floor with my back against the forward wall of the main cabin. I had a clear line of sight to the hatch steps, down which they'd come, if they came at all. I'd decided that if the old man got back before they came, I'd leave

I heard more giggling and a lot of banging around topside as they shipped the dinghy aboard. The giggling sounded high, nervous. I heard the scrape of a key in the padlock on the hatch cover and then the cover sliding back releasing a flood of light.

A girl's voice said, "After you, Captain Queeg," followed by another giggle, and William came awkwardly down the steep hatch steps, a bag of groceries in his arms. Phillipa trailed him, a bag of groceries in her arms, too. They didn't see me until they were halfway to the galley.

I said, "Hold it — not a move!"

They froze, William's knees giving a little, his face suddenly pasty, Phillipa cool, a half-smile fixed on her lips, her eyes more luminous than they should be. They were both high on something. I circled William first, patting him down, and then the girl. They were unarmed.

"Qkay," I said, "put the sacks down and don't break the eggs."

Phillipa giggled again. "You're the man, aren't you?" she said.

"I'm the man you've been waiting for. Your manager told you, didn't she?"

"What's your name?" William said weakly.

I'd hoped he'd ask that. "My name's Smith, son," I said, with scarcely a pause where the comma goes.

It scored. "Smithson?" His voice was a croak.

we don't know a damn thing about laundering money or whatever you call it." They obviously thought I was a competitor — and not only that, a friendly one. They were babes in the woods.

"What about the way you've got?" I said. "Maybe we can use it."

"Nobody but we can," Phillipa said. "It's a one-shot deal." She giggled again and covered her lips with her fingers, coyly, her mind loose as a cloud. I've seen speed freaks act that way, among other ways.

The rage nipped at my belly again. She was a pretty girl, already in that swift decline that strikes so many of our young. Something was missing at the core of her soul, something we hadn't put there. She fumbled out a cigaret and lit it.

"*Smith* — son," I said, drawing it out. He looked about 15 for a moment, but fought to bring himself back to a man's estate.

"Look," he said, his voice still shaky, "you can have it all. We decided last night."

"Who's 'we'? You two and Weston?"

"Yes, just the three of us. Look, Mr. Smith, it's been real great, it's a gold mine, and it's yours for the taking — all of it."

"Why you giving it up so easily?"

"We've got enough," Phillipa said.

"How much?"

"Guess." She giggled.

"A half million," William said quickly. The thought of the money drew his eyes forward toward the chain locker, where it probably was. He paled again, instantly, the way some blonds do. I let him worry for a moment before I said, "Relax. I haven't touched it — not yet. How long did it take to make that much?"

"Less than two years, Mr. Smith."

"And you keep it all there?" I gestured forward.

"Well, you can't put it in the bank and you can't spend it, can you?" He tried to look indignant about it, a man of the world.

"We can now, though," Phillipa said. "We got a way now."

"How?" I said.

"How do you guys do it?" William interjected. "I mean, look —

"Look," William said, "the whole thing is yours — boat, shop and all. We decided last night. We knew you guys were getting close — and, look, we ain't fighters." He tried an amiable grin that failed. Whatever they were on, he was less on it than she. But again, his hair was drawing together again in those dark darts of sweat.

"I'd want a clear title to the boat," I said. "Who owns it — you?"

"Yes."

"You got the pink slip?"

"Not on me, but I can get it."

"I'd want the whole thing done fast."

"Two — three days at the most, Mr. Smith."

"Where's Weston?" I said abruptly.

"We don't need him, Mr. Smith. I own the boat, Phillipa owns the fish-shop. Weston had the connection, but we can give you that as well as he can. It's all yours right now. All right, let's say by Monday."

"Nevertheless, where is he?" He had seemed the dangerous one to me and I didn't want him coming up on my flank.

"He's out of town. We expect him back at midnight, but —"

"Out of town where?"

"North," William said, and simultaneously Phillipa said, "San Francisco." Suddenly she sat down on the bunk behind her, the cigaret slipping from her fingers, William pouncing on it quickly. The *Jenny B.* was rolling slightly from passing harbor traffic and had been all morning.

"She gets sick," William said. "But she gets over it quick." He looked at me pleadingly. He didn't want her to upset the delicate negotiations. "About an hour she's okay, Mr. Smith."

I sighed heavily. I had all I needed to make my fee now — but I wanted more, I wanted it all. I wanted to hand Captain Hawes and Mrs. Smithson an option to take. He had said they'd initiate police action if they thought it necessary and I wanted them to

with him and go on home.

But I was betting they'd come, and early rather than late. No way in the world that manager lady last night didn't have the boss' phone number, and no way in the world she didn't call her the minute I left and tell her about the fake insurance man. They didn't live aboard the boat, except at sea, so the call had gone someplace else.

Last night, probably, they had talked it over and Phillipa would know that the insurance man and the guy spying on them over the fence were one and the same. So the ball had probably gone over the plate and we'd see soon, I thought, whether or not they'd swing at it. They'd have to figure I was a cop, or somebody more dangerous — a competitor.

THEY CAME JUST after I finished my lunch. I had fallen into a light doze, but came awake fast. What I heard first was a giggle and the gentle bump of the rubber dinghy against the boat's hull. I stood up carefully and shook the slight cramp out of my legs and got the Mauser out of my shoulder holster and waited, my adrenalin up a bit, as expected.

"Tomorrow night." William was helping to arrange Phillipa on the bunk. "The coordinates haven't been set yet. I'll go ashore this afternoon and call this number and —"

"What number?" I slipped the Mauser in my belt and got out my notebook and he gave me the number, 714 area code, Los Angeles. Then he gave me everything else, names, dates, quantities, types and prices. Their source could supply almost anything they wanted in almost any amount.

He said it was a small outfit in Mexico, small like they were. He said they cached the pick-up in a compartment in the rubber dinghy that had a release trap activated by pulling a string. In case they ever got stopped, he said, they could dump the stuff, but they'd never been stopped.

That explained why they took the dinghy into Filio's back room last night and he seemed proud of it, like a kid with a hidden drawer in his desk at home. Part of him was still a kid — the rest a dying old man.

I asked him how they gotten started in the game and he said Weston had attended school at Cal Poly a few years back and had met Phillipa there. They began dealing in Mexican marijuana, nickel and dime stuff, until Phillipa inherited Filio's and the possibilities of growth occurred to them. Weston, who came from Sausalito, knew William and knew he had access to a boat and the thing was put together. Just like any other business deal.

"You'll take it?" he said when he was through. "I mean, what the hell, we're giving it to you, man!" He tried that incomplete smile again. Phillipa was asleep

now, snoring gently, and William looked terribly alone in the world, alone and frightened, more frightened than the circumstances warranted. There was something else on his mind — but I had had enough of him.

"We'll take it," I said. "But we'll want a man to go out with you tomorrow. I'll go back and talk to my people right now and we'll send a man over in the morning. His name'll be Smith, too."

"But we've got to catch fish," he said nervously. "I'm supposed to pick up the ice-packs for the fish hatches this afternoon when I'm ashore, and we'll sail the minute Pete gets back. Midnight. We've got to get fish, too, Mr. Smith, that's the cover, don't you see?"

"We'll buy our fish this trip," I said. "My man'll be over around breakfast time. Wait for him." I took the Mauser from my belt and rather showily put it back in its holster.

"Okay," he said reluctantly, confused by the change in routine.

Phillipa gave a startled little yelp and her legs, until then drawn up against her chest, shot straight out and hit the end of the bunk. William leaped and caught her as she rolled toward the deck and I got my coat and went up the hatch steps into the afternoon sun.

If I was lucky the old man would be in sight about now — and he was, fifty yards away, threading through the fleet of moored boats. As he neared, guiding himself over his shoulder, I held a finger to my lips and he shipped oars alongside without a word.

I got aboard and we rowed off quietly. William would be busy for a while with Phillipa, but when he came topside and found me gone it would scare him more than the Mauser had. He had reached that point in the game where ghosts come and go in the mind.

The old man had bagged his limit and was happy as a clam.

FROM MY MOTEL ROOM I could see the *Jenny B.* and I spent a few minutes before checking out, just looking at her. William's next move, inevitably, would be to take the money ashore and stash it someplace else, anyplace else. It was money in limbo right now, technically unowned, up for grabs. With a tap on his skull and a little work on that chain I could be a half-millionaire right now.

But I had learned to fear bad money down through the years and, besides, it would put me in the same trap the three of them were struggling to get out of — how to use the stuff and still escape the IRS and the cops. I didn't much believe in their professed method of cleaning the money. It's not as easy as it sounds and it takes more moxey than I thought they had or could hire. Meyer Lanskys they weren't.

I checked out and took Route 40 east to Interstate 101 and then headed north for home.

It would go this way, I thought — I would tell Captain Hawes and Mrs. Smithson everything I had learned and strongly urge them to pass it on to the police — tonight. I thought they would, guided by honor, despite William's deep involvement and the consequent smear on the family name.

They'd bit that bullet, chin high, I thought, though heartbreaking. Their code would demand it, and tomorrow the Mr. Smith who boarded the *Jenny B.* would be a cop and the Coast Guard would be out there waiting somewhere and one little side-show in the big dirty circus would be closed down.

It was a pattern that should have pleased me, but it didn't. At six I stopped and had dinner and kept pushing stuff around on my plate. I had missed something, and when it came to me I got up so fast my coffee spilled. In the restaurant phone booth I dialed the unlisted number Hawes had given me, not sure now whether it was hers or his. But it didn't matter — there was no answer.

It was quarter to seven. With all the breaks, I could be at Mrs. Smithson's house by eight. Pete Weston was expected back at Morro Bay at midnight. It's a four-hour trip. That meant he planned to wait until around eight, when it was good and dark, before killing her. I tried the number again with the same result and then I got out of there fast.

It was a little after eight when I spun up the winding gravel drive to Mrs. Smithson's house and braked to a stop at the front porch steps. The front door was open, a slab of light showing through, lights on also in the living room.

I was halfway up the steps, my Mauser out, when I heard the shot. I went on to the door, thinking there would be another. But there wasn't. I pushed the door wider and went in at a crouch. Hawes was standing in the open double doors to the living room, a gun in his hand pointing right at my head. I stopped and spread my hands.

"It's Sam Train," I said. I lowered the Mauser gently to the floor and straightened myself slowly, hands up. In the middle of the hallway, Pete Weston lay dead.

Hawes' eyes were narrowed, his tall slender body taut with the shock of the kill. The gun didn't waver from my head. He hadn't recognized me yet. I repeated my name as clearly as I could.

He turned his head slightly, his eyes still rivetting mine and said, "Edna, call the police." Mrs. Smithson was just behind him, one hand on his shoulder.

"Don't call them," I said. "At least not yet. It's possible you won't want to."

"*Train!*" he said. "What the *devil!*" His gun hand lowered.

I left the Mauser where it was and walked the few steps to Wes-

ton's body. Hawes had nailed him in the center of the chest from 12 feet or so. I checked his pulse and then rolled him over and was pleased to see the gun he had dropped in his fall. It looked like a .38. You don't shoot a man just because he's standing in your front hall. But if he's got a gun, you shoot him.

"Now you can call the police if you want," I said. "But I'd rather you waited a while."

"Who the devil is he?" Hawes said. Mrs. Smithson was standing alongside the Captain now, her hand hooked through his arm. They liked to touch each other.

"He's a friend of William's, Captain." I stepped toward them slowly, still wary of that big pistol in his hand and very much aware that I'd caused all this. "But it's a longer story than that. How come you got the drop on him, Captain?"

"Eh?" Hawes was relaxing a little, the kill no longer foremost in his mind. "Well, thanks to you, I suppose," he said. "That suggestion of yours the other day that I protect myself at all times." He looked at his gun with wry wonderment. "Never thought she'd fire another shot in anger."

"You were gone earlier?"

"Yes. We went out to dinner. We had just gotten back — came in through the kitchen from the garage and were going to have a brandy in the living room, when I heard the lock in the front door turn — makes a devilish clank, Train, must replace it someday.

"Well, I'd brought my service gun over the other day after that remark of yours and kept it on the table right here by the living room door. I simply picked it up and waited to see who came in. I had a bead on him from the first and when I told him to put his hands in the air, he whirled on me with that gun and I shot him."

"For which we can all be grateful," I said softly. Phillipa had said it was a "one shot" deal for them, but the shot had gone the wrong way, no thanks to me. I should have known — I should have prevented this.

"Where is William?" Mrs. Smithson said.

"In Morro Bay, ma'am. On the boat."

"Why did this person come here, Mr. Train? Did William send him?"

"Yes he did."

"Why?"

I put it to her bluntly. "To kill you," I said, and wondering if, later on, she would find some small comfort in the fact that he hadn't come himself to do the job.

She was frowning. "But why?"

I sighed. "It's fairly complicated, Mrs. Smithson. He's got a lot of money, but he can't spend it. He and his friends. They've got to make it legitimate first, launder it. You've heard the expression?"

They both nodded, both frowning now.

I sighed again. This would be the worst part for her, I thought. "This man's name is Weston," I said, gesturing. "He and William and a girl named Phillipa Corso have made a half-million dollars in the last couple of years selling dope to school kids.

"It's illicit money, Mrs. Smithson, illegal. They couldn't spend it without attracting the kind of attention that would land them in jail. They needed to launder it and their idea was to turn William into an heir first. Then they could spend anything they wanted."

"Are you sure of this, Train?" Hawes said.

"Yes, and I should have been sure of it earlier than I was, Captain. It penetrated my thick skull about an hour ago. Weston here, is the proof. Incidentally, Mrs. Smithson, I'm also sure it was his idea and not your son's." There was nothing to be lost by trying that, but her eyes seemed opaque, unreceptive. "You understand?" I said.

"Yes," she said, "I understand." Her chin came up. "Thank you for trying to ease it for me, Mr. Train, but I understand it all now."

"Captain," I said, "did you mention brandy? We've got a lot more to talk about and I think the brandy might help."

After I had finished a detailed recitation of the events since Tuesday I said, "As I see it, you've got two options. First, I can leave right now and you can call the police and report you've shot a prowler. No need to mention that he got in with a key William gave him.

"Second, *I* can call the police and report not only Weston's death, but the whole picture and, with luck, we can put a lot of deserving people in jail, including William. The first way, Mrs. Smithson, you suffer the brief, sympathetic attention of the public — the second, you catch a lot of hell for a long time."

I leaned back in my chair and sipped the last of the elegant Remy Martin they'd given me. "But it's up to you," I said. "No cops unless you want them in. That was our deal."

They had been sitting together on a couch facing my chair. Hawes got up almost at once and drew himself tall, looking down at Mrs. Smithson. "Edna," he said firmly, "is there any question about it?"

"No, Alfred," she said, "there's no question about it. Please call the police, Mr. Train. The phone is in the hall."

I smiled at her and then got up and drew the Captain away by his arm. If we gave her a moment alone, I thought, the tears that rimmed her eyes would dry by themselves. I knew she'd prefer it that way.

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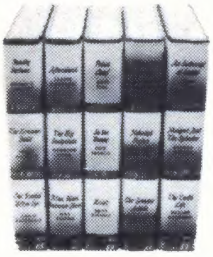

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